

WHERE
THE
DARK
STANDS
STILL

A.B. PORANEK

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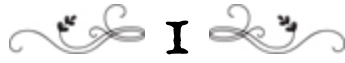
A. B. PORANEK

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For Babcia and Dziadek
because trees cannot grow without roots





THE GIRL WHO ENTERED THE WOOD

THE FESTIVITIES OF KUPAŁA NIGHT are just beginning when Liska Radost leaves the village behind.

Her eyes prick with tears as she takes a final look over her shoulder. A gust of wind snags at her shawl, threatening to devour the flame of her lantern. This night, the solstice, should belong to revelry beneath a broad summer moon. It is the night unmarried girls weave crowns of wildflowers and float them down the river for the local boys to chase, the night that folk songs are sung to the roar of a joyful bonfire, the night when villagers pray to God for fertile fields and livestock and wives. But most importantly, it is the night that, according to legend, the fern flower will bloom.

And if the legends are true, this is the night that Liska will find it. She will take it into her hands and make her wish, and she will atone for her sins.

She treads deeper into the dark, through one of the many wheat fields that crawl along the rolling hills and wreath the village from all sides. In midday, the sun will turn their stalks to spun gold, but now they are a foreboding rustle against Liska's floral-patterned skirts, bowing like penitents in contrition. She raises her lantern higher, but its light is no more than a sputtering spark—a mockery of the Kupała bonfire that dances far in the distance, etching the thatched rooftops of Stodoła into the night's canvas.

Stodoła. Home. A home she will not see again if she does not succeed tonight. She knows what rumors the villagers whisper: that she is a witch, that she is as wicked as the dark magic harbored in the spirit-wood. She almost smiles at the irony: that accursed place, called the Driada, is where the fern flower is said to bloom.

It is her only chance at redemption.

Overhead, the moon rises, a great silver eye opened wide and watchful. It spurs Liska onward, stokes the flame of urgency in her chest. In all the stories, the fern flower only blooms until sunrise—there is not a moment to waste.

Her path takes her past the farmlands, to rolling hills dotted with phantom-white birch trees and coarse grass housing an orchestra of crickets. In an attempt to bolster her spirits, she starts to hum, a folk song about a girl and two suitors and a rowan tree. The crickets set a rhythm, the breeze whispers in harmony, and slowly she convinces herself she is not afraid.

Until the spirit-wood comes into view.

She has seen the Driada before—every child of Stodoła has, brought here by the mischievous curiosity only a child possesses. How often did she stand in this spot with Marysieńka, the two daring each other to creep ever closer to the wood? Closer and closer and *closer*, until a growl or a rustle from within would send them shrieking, running all the way home. Children do foolish things until they are old enough to understand they are foolish—until their father teaches them to weave the straw hangings found in every Stodoła home, or their mother explains why she ties their hair with crimson ribbons. *It is protection*, she will say, gentle yet somber, *from spirits and demons and the evils of the spirit-wood*.

Standing so close, Liska must admit that the forest has a morbid sort of beauty: the beauty of flowers over tombs or the dive of a hawk catching prey. Its trees are enormous, thick as towers and sprawling, with branches like an old woman's fingers tangled in cotton-thick mist. It smells, Liska realizes, like a freshly dug grave—loam and rot and carrion, staining every breath.

Somewhere in there is the fern flower. When she finds it, she must make her wish carefully, for it only grants one. In the legends, men often make poorly worded wishes and meet terrible ends, assuming they make it past the wood's devilish spirits. Here at least, Liska's curse gives her an advantage—she has

always been able to sense spirits, hear them, even see them: the skrzat by the stove complaining of the dirty floor or the kikimora in the neighbor's house exclaiming in delight as she finds yarn to tangle. But those are benevolent house spirits grown fat on offerings of bread and salt, friendly to the humans who shelter them. She doubts the Driada's demons will speak the same tongue.

Is she really going to do this? It's not too late to turn back.

She does not belong here.

A memory: Father Paweł sits in the kitchen of the cramped Radost cottage. He is a young priest, his fraying cassock as patchy as his beard, and his expression is too wary to pass for sympathy. He and Mama are the only people in Stodoła who know of Liska's secret. At least, they were, until two evenings ago.

"The people are beginning to wonder, Dobrawa," Paweł says. "There is no proof, but no one can explain it otherwise. The best thing you can do is to send her away, before she loses control again or the Prawotas rally enough people to their cause."

Liska is not meant to hear his words, but she listens anyway, watching from outside the hut through a crack in the shutters. Her teeth are firmly clamped to her lip, and she tastes iron on her tongue. The day is humid, the sky a cloud-crowded blue, and a chicken is pawing at the dirt by her feet.

"I know, Father, I know, but where would she go?"

Dobrawa Radost—*Mama*—sits across from Father Paweł, picking mint leaves off a stem and laying them out for drying. With her rigid bearing and hoarfrost-cold eyes, she has always reminded Liska of Szklana Góra, the glass mountain from the stories that no knight could conquer. And like that mountain, she is neither kind nor cruel. She is simply indomitable, a trait required of her as Stodoła's folk healer.

"She is of age," Father Paweł replies. "And a well-behaved, proper girl. You could have her married off, apprenticed... or better yet, sent to a convent. God does not turn anyone away, and His presence will keep her from being tempted by those unholy powers."

Dobrawa sighs. "I have considered all those things, Father, but is it truly a good idea to send her off alone? I fear what she may become without guidance."

She throws down a naked mint stem. “Ah, Bogdan would have known what to do with her. He was the only one who truly knew.”

“You are doing the right thing,” Father Paweł assures her. “It is not a condemnation, only a precaution. For her own safety, and...”

And for ours. Those last words went unspoken, but Liska knows what the priest wanted to say: that Liska is dangerous, that she has been corrupted by magic, like an orchard by blight.

“I will change that,” she promises the stars above. “I will make it right.”

She will do anything to prove that she is not dangerous, that she belongs—to the village and her people. Even if it means putting her faith in childhood fairy tales.

She steps forward, farther, closer, until she is looking up at the Driada’s trees. Dread clutches her throat, but she swallows it back.

“God preserve me,” she whispers.

Within the wood, something shrieks in response. The wind? No, it is too uneven.

A howl.

Or perhaps laughter.

Holding up her lantern, Liska Radost stares down the path she has chosen, no more than trampled underbrush between whispering nettles and cruel briars parted like jaws. In the flickering firelight, it all seems a mirage, the threshold to a palace of darkness. Waiting. Watching.

The laughter sounds once more, and this time she forces herself to smile back.

Then she steps between the trees.



Nothing is a certainty in the night in the wood.

In a windless dark shuttered from the world, a tree is not a tree but a disfigured body with crooked limbs; its bark not bark but a grotesque face with cracking skin; the brambles beneath not brambles at all, but wicked talons snatching and tearing at clothes. Nettles sting Liska’s exposed ankles, but the

pain is nothing to the prickling at the back of her neck, the acute feeling that she is being *watched*.

Liska finds she is less afraid than she should be. Perhaps it is because this wood, just like her, is something unnatural, something *other*. By appearance alone, she fits more in the earthen weald than she ever did in the village—hair the color of freshly turned soil, skin olive and cheeks marked with freckles sucked out by the sun. For Kupała, she has worn festive *strój*: a crimson skirt patterned in pale flowers and an embroidered gorset over a lacy white blouse, her wild curls tamed into braids. Around her neck hangs a string of beads in rowanberry red, both a festive accessory and a ward against demons. When it catches on a branch and tears free with a snap, it feels like irony.

She does not stop to pick it up.

The forest deepens. Sourceless lights flash in the distance, too large to be fireflies. Something rustles in the thicket to Liska's right; she could swear she sees a bowlegged *thing* lurking in the fog, but it crawls out of sight before her lantern's light can seize it. The next time she steps forward, something crunches underfoot. *A branch*, she tells herself.

Even if it feels more like bone.

She keeps going. This is her only chance, and desperation far outweighs her fear. In her mind, she can already see it—returning home to Mama and telling her she has nothing more to worry about, that Liska's magic will not trouble them again. No more pottery shattering without a touch, no more fires flaring in her presence, no more birds gathering at her window every morning, as if they want to tell her a secret she cannot understand.

What will life be like when she no longer has to keep her head down and pretend that the disasters trailing in her wake are mere coincidences? When she no longer has to rein in every emotion, lest it trigger her magic?

She had thought, really thought, that she'd finally had it under control.

Until Marysieńka.

The memory claws at her, but she pushes it back again. *Look toward the light*, she reminds herself. *Then you will not see the shadow behind you.*

But there is very little light in the night in the wood.

It is not long before Liska strays off the path. One distracted step, and when she turns around, she can no longer see the trampled trail—only trees ahead and trees behind, pressing ever closer, branches intertwining into a claustrophobic cage, and leaves slapping, cold and wet, against her face.

Her pulse thuds loudly in her ears. Paths like the one she just lost were carved by merchant caravans, passing from Orlica to the neighboring country of Litven. Those merchants enter the Driada prepared—they bring sturdy horses and rifles and swords, sometimes even hired guards. A week before their entry, they leave a tithe: meat or bread or coin at the mouth of the path they choose to follow, offerings for the demon Leszy.

Leszy. A name known to every Stodoła villager, memorized like a prayer yet spoken like a curse. It is he who rules the Driada and keeps the spirits contained, he who protects the travelers in the wood and the villages around it. It is he who does not permit anyone to enter into his domain without paying the tithe—and all know that if the Leszy is not satisfied with what he receives, those who enter the Driada will not return.

Liska made her own offering the night before Kupala—a loaf of rye bread and dried kielbasa, left at the opening of the path she intended to follow. Now that she has strayed, she has lost any hope of the Leszy's protection. Just as the stories tell of the Leszy guarding travelers, they also warn that those who stray from his paths will never find their way back to them again.

“It doesn't matter,” Liska says to the wood, or to God, or perhaps in that moment they are one and the same. “I don't imagine you would hide the flower where it could be easily found.”

That is when her toe strikes a root. She pitches forward gracelessly, crashing to her knees. The lantern slips out of her fingers, glass shattering with a muted *crack*.

The flame goes out.

TREES WITH TOO MANY EYES

DARKNESS LEAPS FORTH LIKE A predator, swallowing the world. All that remains is a silhouette of the canopy above, angular leaves carving moonlight into mangled scraps. Liska loses the reins on her fear, and it breaks free in her chest, an overwhelming torrent.

Her journey becomes a blind stumble, hands scraping against rough bark and pricking on briars. Twigs catch her face, tangling in her hair until her braids come loose. Paranoia claws at the pit of her stomach, causing her magic to stir. *Calm*. She needs to calm down before she loses control. She begins to hum once more, as quietly as she can, focusing on the rise and fall of the melody and willing her heartbeat to match.

She reaches the second verse just as she sees *him*.

A white stag.

He rises out of the fog as if made from it, silken mist lapping at his flanks and frothing at his hooves like whitewater. His antlers arch forward, forming a majestic crown built of uncountable, birch-pale tines. Such appendages should only be an impediment in a forest, yet they do not tangle in the boughs above—in fact, it seems as if the trees bow away from him, pulling back their branches in deference.

The creature's oval pupils lock upon Liska, and the song dies on her lips.

“H-hello,” she breathes, and then gives a curtsy for good measure. It seems appropriate, if silly.

The stag cocks his head. His eyes are fern green, forlorn and ancient, as if he has seen centuries of Orlica’s history unravel before his eyes.

“I don’t suppose you know the way to the fern flower?”

He gives a snort that sounds both exasperated and amused. Despite the fright, Liska’s cheeks warm.

“Well,” she says, flustered, “if you’re not here to help, then I suppose you’re here to eat me. Best get on with it, then.”

The stag takes a step forward. His hooves leave luminous marks in the damp earth.

“At least I’ll be feeding something lovely,” Liska reasons, her heart in her throat. “Better than a strzygoń or a bies.”

Another snort from the stag, a sound more human than it has any right to be. He takes one more step toward her, then wheels around abruptly. Before she can cry out, he bounds away into the wood, leaving glowing hoofprints behind. The marks remain, pulsing in the dark, looking almost like... like a trail.

But to where? Liska hesitates. She knows too well the tales of beautiful demons, of golden-haired południca wielding blood-smeared sickles and rusalka with their enchanted song, showing men their deepest desires to seduce them to watery graves. This could be a trick—is likely a trick. But it is the best option she has.

She follows the stag’s prints. They fade as soon as she passes them, leaving light ahead and darkness behind. Slowly the wood loosens its chokehold, trunks straightening primly and haze lifting to reveal a tapestry of feathery moss. The stag’s trail disappears abruptly, abandoning Liska at the lip of a river, a seething ink-black thing spilling from between twin crooked conifers. Moonlight shines in great beams around her, and the light is a relief, even if the stag’s absence makes her anxious.

“What is this place?” Liska whispers—she dares not speak louder. “Why bring me here?”

She kneels hesitantly by the river, pine needles sharp against her palms as she leans forward to catch her breath. Thoughts of home come creeping in; by now,

the villagers have likely gathered in the main square, dancing joyously as a fiddle croons. Perhaps Father Paweł is saying blessings, or young couples are holding hands and leaping over the bonfire. Oh, how she wishes to be among them.

Before longing can find her, a melody does.

It is unmistakable. Someone is singing nearby, a haunting tune that flows and eddies. The notes caress Liska, guiding her to her feet. They are comforting, warm as a kind embrace or a blazing hearth in midwinter. *Come home, Liska Radost*, they say. *Your quest is over. You have found your place.*

Liska blinks. There is a person standing upriver, as if they have been there all along. A beautiful woman, naked, flaxen curls clinging to her breasts, and arms outstretched in welcome. *Come, Liska, come*, she sings.

Liska nods, lightheaded. She is smiling, though she does not remember why. She also does not remember when she started walking, but she is now close enough to count the joints of the woman's overlong fingers.

A pang in her chest draws her up short. The feeling is dreadfully familiar, like butterflies trapped in the brittle cage of her ribs. A warning. Her magic is awake, and it is warning her.

Suddenly the woman's image flickers. Her flesh sinks against her bones, stringy hair dripping rivulets onto the scabby skin where her lips should be. When Liska recoils, the woman's glassy eyes widen, and her shape changes again. In her place stands Mama, with her spotless apron and severe expression. She approaches Liska, steely eyes softening, and reaches out to take her hands.

"Come home, Liska."

This time Liska ignores the warning in her chest. She wants nothing more than to take those hands, to feel the firm certainty of their grip. And that smile... how long has it been since she last saw her mother smile?

"You've done it, słoneczko," Mama repeats, gentler now. "It's over. Come home with me."

Liska blinks. *Słoneczko*—that was Tata's nickname for her, but never Mama's. Blunt, pragmatic Dobrawa Radost is not one for endearments.

Her mother is not here.

Liska flinches away, pressing her palms to her eyes. When she opens them again, Mama's face warps, her smile stretching wider and wider, impossibly

wide, showing glimpses of needle-like teeth and a pale, thin tongue.

“You’re wrong,” Liska whispers to the creature. “Mama wants to send me away.”

She runs for the river.

The woman—no, *rusalka*—dives. She melts into the murky waters, vanishing in the current. Refusing to turn back, Liska leaps off the river’s bank and lands on the opposite side, knees buckling from the impact. She slips in the mud just as the *rusalka* emerges behind her, lipless mouth gaping in a screech and bony fingers scrabbling for Liska’s skirts.

Liska gasps. She grips a fallen log and anchors herself, kicking with all her might. Her heel strikes something brittle that cracks like an eggshell—the accompanying shriek tells her that she has kicked the *rusalka*. The demon releases her. After a heartbeat, the water grows still and silent. Liska exhales shakily, braving a glance over her shoulder.

The *rusalka* leaps out of the water and seizes the straps of her gorset.

Liska does not have the time to scream. The world tilts as she is yanked off her feet and slammed backward into the glacial torrent, bubbles filling her vision.

Slimy fingers close around her throat.

Terror clenches Liska’s innards as gritty river water fills her nostrils, darkness above and below as she is pulled down, down. The river is far deeper than it looks, and through water-blurred vision, she can see the pearly flashes of bones lining the riverbed. Panic seizes her, followed by a delirious sort of amusement. *That’s it, then, she thinks. I will die and become ghastly décor.*

But something inside her resists. It wakes with the flutter of a thousand trapped wings, shoving painfully against the cage of her chest. Her magic, responding to her panic. It shatters through her skin in a bloom of blinding light, taking its usual shape: butterflies, a cloud of them, whirling and erratic. The burst of power shoves away the *rusalka*, but not before her nails rake painfully across Liska’s throat. Liska does not waste a moment—she kicks off the demon’s chest, propelling herself toward the bank, and breaks the surface with a gasp. Shuddering, she scrambles onto the rocks, barely pausing to cough up

putrid water before righting herself on the sticky bark of a pine tree. She looks over her shoulder, expecting pursuit, but there is nothing.

The rusalka is gone.

The wood is still.

Liska staggers into a run. She does not stop, not even when she leaves the comfort of the river's moonlit clearing. Sweat coats her neck, and her pulse roars to the nauseating thrum of magic hammering at her chest. She needs to get away, away from that horrible river. Yet no matter how far she runs, she cannot find relief. These are the stories of her childhood given life, transformed from nightmares into reality.

She cannot even find comfort in her magic. It protected her this time, yes, because it chose to—unlike the last time, when it left blood on her hands and death in her wake. It can never be trusted. She needs to end this, and soon. But where is the flower?

As if hearing her question, a familiar shape appears in a copse up ahead, its antlered head angled toward her. The stag! Liska starts toward him, but the creature vanishes in a swirl of mist. "Wait!" she exclaims, panting, then laughs at her own folly. "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

There is no answer, only the sound of her own ragged breathing as she turns to survey her surroundings. She now stands on the edge of a shallow ravine, the sides plunging steeply into the maw of a gully. Surrounding her are nine peculiar trees forming a semicircle, their trunks bulging with strange lumps. At first glance, the lumps seem to be no more than burls, but as she looks closer, she realizes they are *pulsing*.

Liska presses her hands to her mouth, backing away, but it is too late.

Cracks fissure down the middle of each lump, the bark pulling apart to reveal bloodshot eyes. *Human* eyes. Human eyes that weep yellowed sap as they fix upon Liska.

The wood has seen her.

She backs away, but there is nowhere to go. Her heel slips on the lip of the ravine, and suddenly the ground is crumbling beneath her feet, the earth giving way beneath her.

Her flight is short. Her feet strike a crooked sapling, the impact tossing her to the ground. What follows is an uncontrolled slide. She gropes desperately for anything to slow her fall as her knees scrape brutally over stones and sharp branches. When she finally reaches the bottom, she collapses onto the ground.

She lies dazed for a moment—one single, bleary moment, the air knocked out of her, body aching. Then she forces herself to her knees, her hands scraping against something hard and... entirely out of place.

Cobblestones, laid side by side.

Startled, Liska scrambles upright. Ahead of her, a cobblestone path snakes into the dark, cracked and moss-eaten and haphazard. She stares at it apprehensively. A part of her is relieved to find a sign of civilization, but another is unsettled—she has heard of roads used for traveling through the spirit-wood, but this one seems too narrow to fit even the smallest cart. Yet if it is not one of those, then... where does it lead?

She finds her answer soon enough. Despite its size, she barely notices the manor in the gloom, tucked between the trees like a slumbering giant. It is not really a manor, anyway, more the memory of one—shattered windows and flaking paint and a crooked tower that barely remember how to be a home anymore. All is caged by a stone wall, veiled in ivy and fronted by a gate guarded by statues of stags. The gate might have been beautiful once, but now it hangs limp on its hinges, the spires a mess of rust and iron. The whole radiates a sort of miserable resignation, as if the manor has offered itself up as a calf to be slaughtered by the Driada.

The gate hinges give a squeal of protest when Liska pushes them open, startling her. Beyond, the gardens are a jungle unto themselves, overgrown hedges corrupted by briars. Only the flagstone path remains unveiled, littered with leaves and twigs. It meanders across the courtyard, leading to a small clearing where a fountain might have stood, had this estate belonged to the human world.

But it does not. It belongs to spirits and demons.

So in the middle, Liska does not find a fountain. Instead, she finds a fern, sprawling and lush and unnaturally green, so green it seems to glow.

And there, nestled in the halo of its fronds, is a single flower.

A NOT-SO-CLEVER FOX

THE FERN FLOWER IS AS beautiful as the legends say.

It looks more like a tongue of flame than a flower, blazing with hues of ochre and gold and vermilion. And just like a flame, Liska hesitates to touch it, certain it will scorch her fingers. It gives off a sound, a steady thrum, like a pulse, like a *heartbeat*. As if every root in the wood is a vein, every branch an artery, and all of them find their home in this small bloom.

Rooted in place by both awe and disbelief, Liska stares at the flower. She's done it. The tales were wrong. She's found the flower, and she is still alive—for now.

The most important task still awaits: to pick the flower and make her wish. *Let my magic be gone*, she will say. What will it feel like when her wish is granted? Will her magic vanish as if it were never there, or will it wither little by little? Then, once it is all done, she must still find her way out of this woodland maze. But there is a glimmer of hope, and to Liska that is enough. Like a beggar, she has learned to enjoy crumbs.

Without further hesitation, she reaches out. Carefully she cups her hands around the flower's silken petals, the rhythm of its power rushing through her. *Throb, throb*, louder and louder, until her bones feel like they will shatter from the force. She pushes through, taking the flower's stem, her wish on her lips, and

—
“It's lovely, isn't it?”

The voice is not human. It cannot be, not the way it echoes all around. She has never heard the devil speak, but if she did, she imagines he would sound the same: sultry and beguiling, smooth as water along a riverbed. She looks around in alarm, trying to locate the source, but with the pulsing of the fern flower's magic still rattling her bones, she can hardly tell up from down.

“Unfortunately, little thief, I cannot let you have it.”

Suddenly the stag is there. He stands in the gateway, his head tilted to one side. “What is your name?” he asks pleasantly.

The voice is *his*. The stag speaks, though his mouth does not move. And Liska knows now that he is not a stag at all. He is the warden of this wood, and it would be more than unwise to give him her name.

“Are you a fish?” the stag muses, a sound far too predatory to belong to such a gentle creature. “No? Then do not gape like one. A name is a simple thing, yet you cannot give it. Are you simple? If you are, then I shall be glad. It will make my job far easier.”

Liska closes her mouth, opens it again. This time her voice obeys, though it trembles slightly. “I am *not* simple.”

“That, I shall be the judge of.” He takes a step forward, then another, each pace arrogant and taunting, a tomcat cornering a mouse. “You still have not given me your name.”

“Must I?” she challenges him. Her magic batters against her chest, a warning almost as strong as with the rusalka. “I don't need you to tell me yours. I know who you are.”

He flicks an ear, coming even closer. The fern is now all that stands between them. “Oh?”

“The Leszy.”

A pause. Wind howls through the interlude, filling the air with the sound of shuddering leaves. The stag raises his head and takes one more step.

And begins to *rot*.

There is no other way to describe it. As if devoured by insects, his flesh withers away, his muscles decomposing as silvery fungi erupt along his flank, then rot in turn. The skin falls from his face to reveal yellowed bone and cracked teeth; his eyes sink into his skull and vanish in the blackness of gaping sockets.

His skeleton breaks and shifts and re-forms; it is like his body is taking itself apart and reassembling into a whole new shape.

Into a man.

No, a half-man; the stag's ghoulish skull remains, hiding his face from view. Moon-pale, he moves with unnatural grace, his wool sukmana rustling softly as it brushes against the fern. His skin is wan and ashen, his hair white with age. He wears the wilderness like a trophy, the shapes of thistles and thorns embroidered on his sleeves, and viridian hues striping the sash around his waist.

"Yes, I am he," says the demon. He is tall and lean in stature, holding himself with the elegance of an aristocrat. "As for you, I will only ask once more. What is your name?"

"Kasia," Liska says quickly.

The demon goes still, and so does the wood around him, as if every bracken and bough is straining to listen to their conversation. Then he murmurs, "I can hear the skips in your heartbeat, little liar. Try again."

Liska's throat constricts with shock. She swallows, then speaks once more, chastened now. "L-Liska." That is all she will give him. Her surname is hers to keep.

He chuckles warmly. "Liska, Liseczka... *oj*, lisku. You're not a very clever fox, are you?" The closer he comes, the more he looms, and she fidgets beneath the void-like stare of those empty sockets. "Yet you survived the rusalka. How?"

"Luck," Liska says.

"Lying again."

"I'm not—"

"You saw through her illusions, didn't you?" He leans forward and sniffs, deeply. "You have magic in your blood, not-so-clever fox. That makes you useful. Tell me, then—what did you want from my flower?"

His flower. Of course. Like the rusalka, the fern flower is a trap, or perhaps a test. Another rope in the net of the Driada's devilry, a net she is hopelessly tangled in.

The Leszy clicks his tongue. "*Oj*, you really *are* simple. Let me help you, then. Is it riches? Success? No, wait. With little girls like you, it's always unrequited

love. Who is he, then? Farmhand? Baker? Heir to a fortune? Come, come, not-so-clever fox. There is always a story.”

Somewhere halfway through his speech, anger begins to simmer in her stomach. When he pauses for breath, she blurts: “I want my magic gone.”

The answer seems to surprise the Leszy. He leans back, reassessing her carefully. “And why would you want that?”

Marysieńka, she almost says. *And Tata*, her mind adds, but she shoves the voice back. She does not answer, only hugs her arms around herself. “Will you kill me?”

“Do you want me to?” comes the taunting response. His long fingers are suddenly at her neck, a hard nail scraping up her throat to lift her chin. “You seem like a timid thing, yet you were bold enough to trespass onto my estate and steal from my garden. You must want it badly, to come all this way.”

Liska nods, lowering her eyes instinctively. Demure, polite Liska, easy to miss in a crowd. *If you give them no reason to notice you, Mama likes to say, then they will not notice anything unusual about you.*

“I have been alone for so long, little fox. Watching over this wood consumes my waking moments. So I offer you this: serve me for a year, and when you are done, I will grant your wish. Even if”—he chuckles softly—“even if it is the most ridiculous wish I have ever heard.”

He speaks it like a verdict yet offers it like a bargain. Liska steps back, biting her lip. “And if I refuse?”

“Then I will let you go,” the demon says. “But you will be without the flower and without my protection. I am the warden of this wood, and there are consequences to crossing me. But perhaps you will be one of the lucky few. Perhaps you will make it back to the border before my denizens catch a whiff of you and decide they want a taste.”

He is terrible, Liska realizes. *And worse, he is insufferably arrogant.* She presses a steadying hand to her chest, trying to find reason in all the madness. A year is not a long time. It is four seasons, and those always pass quickly—snow melting and snowdrops blooming before she manages to savor the crisp scents of autumn. She can survive a year away from home, even if it pains her to imagine what Mama will do when she finds Liska’s note and realizes where she has gone.

It will be worth it. A year is worth it. A year is enough for Liska's mistakes to fade into distant memory, for the villagers to forget their suspicions and find newer, fresher scandals for gossip. Perhaps it will even be enough for Pani Prawota to abandon her obsession with proving Liska a witch. After all, she has already gotten what she wanted: Liska driven from Stodoła, no longer a danger to its people. And when Liska returns at last, her magic gone, that much will remain true. She will be just like any other villager. She will belong.

Belong.

Yes, a single year at the whims of a wood demon is worth a lifetime of belonging.

Steeling herself, she raises her chin, forces herself to look into the sockets of that ghoulish skull.

"Very well," she says, choosing her words carefully. "For my wish and my freedom in a year's time, I am at your service."

The deer skull has no expression at all, but there is an edge of mocking delight in his voice. "And so the not-so-clever fox makes an almost-clever choice." He reaches up, slender-fingered hand wrapping around one of his antlers' tines. With a sharp tug, he snaps it free; it breaks not like bone but like a branch, splintering and cracking. He holds the shard in one hand and snatches Liska's left wrist with the other.

Startled, she jerks at his grip, but he does not budge. Strange green light flickers along the branch as he touches it to her skin. Then it *moves*, supple as a snake. Before Liska can pull away, it coils around her wrist.

When the Leszy releases her, Liska is wearing a fetter of wood. She clasps her free hand around it, shame pricking her eyes. She feels as if she has sold her soul.

"The bargain is sealed," the Leszy says. "You are mine for a year. Now come along." He brushes past her, striding toward the manor.

Liska bites her lip and takes one final, doleful look at the fern. At some point while she was speaking to the Leszy, the fern flower vanished. Without its ember-hued light, the fern itself can barely be seen among the weeds. And Liska is far from home, in the company of a demon.

A year is worth it, she reminds herself, running her fingers over the fetter. How different can serving the Leszy be from life in Stodoła? Ever since Tata's

death, Liska has looked after the homestead, cooked dinners, and cared for the garden. Even if she is not the strongest or most disciplined, she is capable enough. And judging by the state of the manor, she is likely more capable at those things than the Leszy.

“I haven’t got all night, fox.” The Leszy’s silky cadence interrupts her thoughts.

Liska takes a nervous breath. She eyes the manor doors, menacing constructs of old wood and flaking black paint that vanish behind a curtain of honeysuckle. She dares not imagine what she will find beyond them.

“I only have two rules,” the Leszy calls out. “The first is that you stay out of my way.”

She nods, feeling faint. “And the second?”

“That you must never leave the estate grounds without me, nor the manor after dark. Obey these, and you will be free in a year... assuming you survive that long.”

THE HOUSE UNDER THE ROWAN TREE

INSIDE, THE LESZY'S MANOR SMELLS of mildew and desolation. The entry doors utter a rasping lament as they close behind Liska, and she narrowly avoids walking through a cobweb as she steps into the foyer. The Leszy does not wait—he brushes past her and stalks into the manor, leaving Liska alone to gather her bearings. His cryptic warning, however, lingers: *Assuming you survive that long.*

Best not to think about that now. It is too late to turn back.

A coatrack occupies the narrow foyer, white with dust and hung with mismatched paraphernalia: an archaic cloak, a thick coat for winter wear, and a worn woolen scarf. Liska hesitates before taking off her shawl and hanging it on the rack. The simple act makes her situation feel more tangible somehow—yes, she lives here now, and she hangs her outerwear beside that of a skull-headed monster. She removes her boots, too, though she finds no slippers with which to replace them. Her teeth chatter as she pads across the cold hardwood to follow the Leszy.

Even veiled in cobwebs and dust, the manor clings to a former magnificence, like an old woman recalling the vigorous days of her youth. It is also obviously *enchanted*—Liska has never known well what the word means, but she does now. She knows it, because as she walks by ornate sconces, they flicker to life, illuminating her passage with sudden flame, then puffing out once she leaves them behind.

The entry hall is drafty and narrow, with a stairwell of oily wood coiling up to an overlooking gallery. High above, a chandelier throws sputtering light, iron arms shaped like branches and tipped with candles wrapped in hammered-metal leaves. It illuminates a vaulted ceiling painted with roaring elk and towering trees, gilded accents dulled by cobwebs. Despite the light, the corners of the room remain dark, and every shadow flickers erratically.

The Leszy waits on the stairwell, gazing down at Liska. His pallid appearance contrasts starkly against the dark of the manor, making him all the more wraithlike. There is something unnervingly inhuman about his posture, back rigid and head cocked, his arms at his sides.

“Welcome to the House Under the Rowan Tree,” he says. His voice echoes through the abandoned halls, drawing out each syllable in a timorous refrain. “Go where you wish, but do not set foot in the topmost tower room. I expect breakfast at eight in the morning and dinner at five in the evening—leave them at the tower room door.” He pauses, and there is a certain awkwardness to it, as if he is unsure what to do with Liska now that he has her. “That is all,” he says finally. “Good night.”

He turns, his long-legged strides up the stairs accentuated by groans and creaks of aged wood, the sound fading as he reaches the landing and vanishes out of sight.

Alone in the silent hall, Liska feels a shiver creep down her spine. The manor is unsettling and decrepit, with its peeling wallpaper and rusting metal. Looking around, she knows there is much work awaiting her, enough to make a seasoned Orlican housewife tear at her hair.

“Tomorrow,” she decides. “I will worry about it tomorrow.” The last word morphs into a tired yawn. She is exhausted, both from her maddened run through the wood and the relentless pulse of fear in her chest. Sleeping in the house of a demon is less than appealing, but her bleary vision and heavy eyelids are impossible to deny.

She tiptoes carefully to an adjacent room and peers in. The space is dark, but she can make out the shadows of a gaping hearth and worn settees set around a low table. It looks to be a small parlor. She steals a cloak from the foyer and shakes off an unhappy spider, then unlaces her gorset and takes off her skirt,

leaving herself in a blouse and petticoat. She picks stray leaves out of her hair and a thorn out of her finger before curling up on a settee and pulling the cloak over her shoulders.

Her body aches and her mind is reeling, but fatigue reigns above all else. Tomorrow will bring sunlight and a new day—surely the Driada will not be so frightening then. The thought calms her somewhat, and she drifts slowly to sleep.



Drip, drip, drip.

Her eyes snap open at the sound.

Something is watching from the shadows. A monstrous something, half corpse and half hound, huge and gangly with fur black as pitch. Its eyes are glowing embers; the flesh around its chest and mouth has rotted away, revealing slashes of pearly ribs and yellowed canines dripping saliva onto the floor.

Drip... drip...

Liska jolts upright, heart pounding.

The hound is gone.

She does not close her eyes again until light begins to creep in through the filthy window. Only then, to the distant chatter of waking birds, does she fall asleep once more.



Liska wakes to a room bathed in the buttery gold of early morning. For a short, groggy moment she thinks herself home in Stodoła, before feeling the branch-fetter around her wrist and a prickly burr clinging to her blouse. She sits up sluggishly, peeling the burr away as memories come rushing back: the Driada, the rusalka, her bargain with the Leszy, and finally the red-eyed hound.

The hound. She looks around in alarm, half expecting it to be standing behind her. But no, she is alone. And according to the grandfather clock by the wall, late to making breakfast.

The thought of displeasing the Leszy is enough to send her leaping to her feet. She pushes aside curtains of white lace and wrestles open the window,

letting in moist air smelling of wet earth and leaves. Beyond, the Driada's trees are rich and verdant, dressed in moss and trimmed with lichen.

Sun dapples scatter across the abandoned garden and into the room, warming Liska's face as she redoes her disheveled braids and puts on the rest of her strój. She tries to ignore the clench of her chest as she looks over the torn embroidery—her Sunday clothes, ruined.

She wanders out of the parlor and into the dimly lit hall, craning her neck to take in everything she could not see in the dark of night. She has never been in a manor before and has only seen a mere handful from the back of a cart during trips to the Gwiazdno market.

The biggest house she has ever entered belonged to the wójt, the governor of Stodoła. He had called upon Liska, knowing her reputation with animals, when his prize stallion had developed a horrid cough. It had not taken her much to help the stallion—merely wetting his hay and letting him out of his dusty stall to pasture. Still, the wójt had been grateful enough to invite Liska and Mama for dinner, and Liska had seen inside his sturdy house with its shingled roof and three large, sunny rooms.

The House Under the Rowan Tree is a fortress compared to that place. Everywhere Liska looks are intricate carvings and ornate vases and proud, arching windows. Despite the thick coat of dirt and cobwebs, everything is grand and impressive and utterly overwhelming.

It does not help that the House Under the Rowan Tree obstinately refuses to be *ordinary*. The first thing Liska notices are the paintings: instead of the usual ancestors or saints, they depict beady-eyed animals in dark woodlands, prowling through thickets of cloistering thorns. Eyeing them, Liska runs her hand over a banister, sending up a cloud of dust and leaving her fingertips soft with grime. Even the dust is strange in the manor—instead of billowing up and settling again, it rises in spirals and whorls, brushing against Liska like an over-affectionate cat. It trails after her, twining around her ankles until she looks at it directly and says, “Please, not now. I’m nervous enough already, and you’re getting all over my clothes.”

Like a child scorned, the dust settles once more, and Liska wonders if she has already lost her mind.

When she discovers the bathroom at last, it is by far the least filthy place in the manor. She is also stunned to see it has plumbing—something she has heard of but not seen, pipes and spouts sticking out over the marble sink and lion-footed bathtub. Unlike what she has heard, the pipes are not copper—instead they are coarse with bark, as if made from hollowed-out tree roots. And perhaps they are. At this point, nothing would surprise her.

Tree-root pipes or not, Liska is eager to try them out. A turn of the tap sends out a cascade of pleasantly cool water, and she uses it to scrub the grime and dirt off her face, along with the crusted blood from a wound where a branch slapped her.

There is a mirror above the sink, framed in iron branches, and Liska spends a minute staring into it, face dripping. She feels changed, yet she does not look it. She is still the same plain, unassuming girl with the upturned nose and dark hair, features she inherited from Tata. Her eyes, meanwhile, are blue like Mama's; but while Mama's are all frost, Liska's have always been softer. *Like periwinkles*, Tata used to say. She has done a poor job with her hair, and a thick curl snakes out from beneath her kerchief. This one is white, part of a grayed streak that begins at Liska's temple—it appeared after the incident with Marysieńka.

Incident. It seems too kind, too mild a word for what Liska has done. Her breath stutters, and for a heartbeat she can see it all again.

Marysieńka, mouth open in a scream, crumpling to the ground...

“No.” She speaks the word aloud, clenching her hands on either side of the sink. The cool of the marble seeps into her, grounding her until she can breathe normally again. Hastily, she tucks the white curl back under the kerchief and rushes from the bathroom.

The kitchen, thankfully, is not hard to find. It is a simple, utilitarian room with wood-paneled walls, an abundance of shelves and a vast, tiled stove housing an oven and a compartment for firewood. Dust motes hang thick in the air, turning the room hazy and dreamlike. Further exploring yields a larder with a meager supply of flour, one bottle of milk, and a bowl heaped with eggs. Liska makes a mental note to go looking for a cellar later; for now, she can work with what she has.

Anyway, how hard can it be to please a demon?

She makes *zacierki* dough by mixing the flour with an egg, and tears it into small pieces while the milk heats on the stove. She is sliding the *zacierki* into the boiling milk when it occurs to her that she has seen no chickens at the manor, and certainly no cow. Could it be that the *Leszy* crosses into the human world? That would certainly be a sight to behold.

She scoops her hasty breakfast into porcelain bowls, finds a tray, sets it with a bowl and a spoon, and sighs. Despite her best efforts to ignore it, dread has built up in her gut like cream over day-old milk. This is no different than life in the village, she reasons. She simply must keep her head down and stay out of trouble, and she will be free... in a year.

Before leaving the room, she casts a mournful look at the stove, missing the companionship of her family's *skrzat*. Usually, the house-spirit would be sitting on a shelf or watching from the shadows, silent, but there were times he would join her, a tiny man with a beard full of soot and eyes black as coals, and help with the chores. Mama could never see him, and when Liska tried to point him out, she would squeeze Liska's hand painfully and say, "There is nothing there, you understand?"

At first, Liska did not. But she learned.

Inside the manor tower, the walls are stone and cold; the stairs are rustic, in a style far older than the rest of the manor. There is a window at the top, unglazed, and it looks out onto the sprawl of a tall rowan tree, crowned with flowers white as midwinter and a scattering of early berries. At the top of the stairs waits a single wooden door—Liska places the tray in front of it and knocks. When there is no answer, she cups her hands over her mouth and calls, "*Leszy?*"

Nothing. She tries again. "Ah, *Panie Leszy?*"

Silence. Tentatively, she retreats. She is halfway down the stairs when she hears the door creak open and the scrape of the tray being picked up.



It is past noon when Liska rolls up her sleeves and sets to work. There is much of it, an overwhelming amount, but she is determined to bring order back into the chaos. She's never been a particularly clean person before—if she had a coin for every time Mama chastised her for tracking mud into the kitchen or staining her

clothing, she would be rich indeed—but there is something about the manor that makes her pity it. It is like an old hunting dog, once its master's pride, now forgotten and discarded. Liska immediately wants to help it—wants to nurture it back to health and see light return to its forgotten halls.

She begins with reconnaissance. She walks the perimeter of the estate, as far as she dares, keeping a wary eye on the forest beyond the wall. She brings a kitchen knife with her just in case, though she doubts it will do her any good should she encounter a demon, or worse, the red-eyed hound.

Like everything else, the back of the manor is ensnared by weeds and encroaching woodland. There Liska finds a crumbling well and the door to a cellar. Both are tucked away, overgrown with moss and ivy, with only a path of crushed undergrowth to indicate that the Leszy makes use of them. Blessedly, the cellar is better stocked than the kitchen, with a few slabs of salted meat, along with potatoes, beets, and grains. The sight makes Liska's mouth water—in border villages like hers, meat is expensive, eaten only on holidays or weekends by wealthier families.

Once she has taken stock, Liska begins her second task. There were no herbs or seasonings in the kitchen, but there are many growing outside that she recognizes: yellow-flowering dill, wild garlic, horseradish, mint, and thyme with its purple blooms. She gathers them all up in the folds of her skirt and brings them back to the kitchen before coming out with a pail for well water.

That is how her afternoon passes: trying to turn the empty shell that is the manor into the shadow of something lived in. She mixes flour and water for leaven, boils a slab of salted meat for *rosół*, and takes down and scrubs the pots and pans. Her tasks completed, she rubs her forehead with a flour-coated sleeve and turns to survey the kitchen.

That is when she notices the room has changed.

On the wall by the stove is a wooden bolt, affixed with hooks for hanging pots and pans. At least it *was* there, the last time Liska looked. Now it is gone.

In its place is a door.

It is a heavy door, stately, painted like a midnight sky in indigo and star-specks of gold. The knob is in the shape of a starburst, and light beams in from the crack beneath, as though the sun is trapped on the other side.

Liska freezes. In that same moment, footsteps echo in the hall. Startled, she glances toward the noise, then back to the door.

But there is no door. The pots and pans have returned, as if they never vanished.

What—

Liska does not get the chance to ponder it, because a shadow fills the doorway. Then the Leszy is standing there, all antlers and horror, looking even more ghastly in the day than he did on the midnight of midsummer.



A BROKEN SORT OF MAGIC

LISKA STIFLES A SURPRISED YELP, clamping her hands over her mouth. The Leszy freezes as well, his arms at his sides, his stag-skull head sneering its perpetual grin. He is not wearing his sukmana today, only a loose shirt, tucked into a wide, many-buckled belt, and trousers with embroidery at the pockets. He says nothing, and neither does Liska. They stare at each other, demon and girl, each startled to have the other for company.

“There was...” *A door*, Liska begins to say, then thinks better of it, because she hardly knows what she saw. Another beat of silence follows. The demon continues to stare.

Finally Liska says, “There is much in your storerooms.”

“Yes,” he replies.

“But you have no garden or fields.”

“No,” he says.

“So...” She trails off, taut as a bowstring. “How?”

The demon’s tone is dismissive. “Payment.”

She frowns before she remembers. *Oh*. The tithes. Are there truly so many? Now that she thinks of it, she doesn’t even know how far the Driada spans—she has only ever seen a map of Orlica once, in one of Father Paweł’s precious books. It must be far, if there are so many people who cross it.

“How do you protect them all?” she asks.

“That is for a demon to worry about. Return to your work, not-so-clever fox, and try not to muddle up my manor too much.”

Liska forces herself to nod demurely, biting her tongue as he turns around and strides off again. Only once he is gone does she utter an offended, “*Muddle up?* I am trying to un-muddle it, thank you very much.”

The Leszy returns an hour later, no more than a passing shadow and soft footsteps as he vanishes up the stairs. Liska brings a bowl of hot rosół to the tower soon after. When she sets down the tray and knocks, the Leszy calls out, “Come in.”

His voice echoes down the stairwell, menacing in the darkness of the tower. Liska bites her lip and reaches for the rusty knob on the door. Before she can grasp it, a tangle of branches grows from cracks between the floorboards, crawling up the doorframe and twining around the knob. As Liska stands, astonished, the branches twist, dexterous as human hands, and wrench the door open.

What lies beyond could perhaps be called a study, but the word seems inadequate in the face of such scale. Liska heard the word “laboratory” once from Father Paweł, when he talked about the scholars in his home city of Aniołów. He described it as a room where wisdom and chaos have formed a bargain, where a person realizes how truly little they know, and desires, suddenly, to know so much more.

That is how Liska feels, beholding the sheer magnitude of *things* in the circular room—things of unknowable purpose and form, shelves of vials and scrolls and chests. Jewels glitter in bowls, skulls leer from the walls, and stacks of books teeter in every corner. The Leszy himself sits at a desk of engraved ebony, set before a lancet window and surrounded by branches.

Moving branches. They are pale, spindly, tipped with leaves, sprouting from the floor and reaching from the walls like crooked arms. Most are immobile, but as Liska watches, one snakes across the room to snatch a vial from a shelf and brings it back to the Leszy’s expectant hand.

There is a live moth in the vial, its white wings painted with narrow eyespots. When the Leszy pulls out the cork, it turns into mist, billowing through the

narrow mouth of the bottle before re-forming into a moth. It flutters out the window and vanishes between the trees.

“What was that?” Liska’s voice is small and squeaky, yet it echoes through the room.

“One of my sentinels,” he replies. “There are travelers entering the Driada as we speak, and my moths will alert me if there is any trouble.”

“Those travelers must have paid you well,” Liska remarks before she can stop herself.

“They did,” he says loftily. “Now, put that down and stop talking—no, don’t leave. Just be silent.”

He does not even look at her as he sets the vial down and extends his hand again. This time a smaller branch slithers across his desk and skims along a bookshelf. It hovers over the volumes, pensive, before selecting a hefty tome and bringing it to the Leszy. He takes it and rifles through the pages before placing it in front of Liska. She squints—though she knows her letters, she is used to reading nothing but ledgers and recipes.

“You can read, can you not?” Despite the empty eye sockets, she can feel him glower.

“Yes, but—” She bites her lip. “Panie Leszy, this says ‘regeneration spell.’ It’s —” *A spell.* Those are things witches would cast on heroes in Tata’s stories, turning them into swans or mice or other unnatural things.

“Magic,” the Leszy says, at the same time that Liska says, “Witchcraft.”

He snorts. “I can see you’ve been raised in the Faith like any good Orlican. Yes, the Church certainly likes to preach on the evils of magic and spirits and summonings. But before you called us witches, we had another name: *czarownik*. Our gifts were revered, not reviled.”

A caving roof, Marysieńka’s scream, a thousand mistakes. How can he call any of it a gift? She wraps her arms around herself. “I won’t do it.”

“You will.” Gone is the scathing disinterest in the Leszy’s tone, replaced with silken threat. “You made a bargain, fox. You are at my service. You think I would go through all this trouble just to find any old servant to cook and clean?”

A bolt of fright courses through Liska’s every limb, rooting her to the spot. “No,” she says slowly. *Of course not.* For when are things ever simple, with

demons? The Leszy may claim he was revered once, may mock her piety, but Liska was warned all her life: demons are agents of the devil, sent to sow chaos and tempt humans to sin. Magic is their element, and lies are their weapons.

“Why do you want this so badly?” she demands, already fearing the answer. “Why do you need my magic?”

“Why does anyone need magic?” he replies. “For power. For control.”

Liska opens her palms. “Why don’t you just take it, then? Then you would have what you want, and I would have what I want. I could go home.” He voice trembles on the last word.

The Leszy snorts derisively. “If only it worked that way,” he says. “Listen. I told you that guarding these woods consumed my waking moments, did I not? You”—he jabs a finger at her chest—“are here to take part of that burden off my shoulders. And you cannot survive a day out there”—a second jab at the window and the forest beyond—“without magic.”

She digs her fingers into her palms. “How do I know this is not just the beginning? That you aren’t trying to tempt me so I become a... a demon, like you?”

A laugh, sharp as a needle. “There is only one demon like me, and there only ever will be.”

With that, he shifts his attention back to the chaotic array on his desk. At the back of the desk lies a glass orb trapping a single forget-me-not, and beside it is a bowl of dried rowanberries. With a single, smooth motion, he gathers a few berries and places them in front of Liska. They remind her of the necklace she lost in the forest, and she shudders.

The Leszy is unfazed. “Magic is the art of manipulating souls, of asking things to become other things and breathing life into things that have none. Bring those rowanberries back to life. Turn them fresh and red again.”

Liska shakes her head, but her resolve flickers. He has all the power here, and she has none of it, and she does not want to find out how far he will go to get what he wants. Perhaps it would be better to do as he says. Once he sees how volatile, how deeply dangerous her magic is, he will surely see that it is best left buried.

God forgive me. She forces herself to look down at the book, to read over the lines of text. It's written simply enough, as if for children. Following the instructions, she closes her eyes and focuses. *Connect with the essence, the soul, of the target you wish to change,* the book instructs, so she tries, though she feels ridiculous. The silence that follows is unsettling, and the world throbs in her senses: the demon's looming presence and the rustle of paper on the desk and the scrape of the rowan tree clawing at the tower walls.

It doesn't help that the Leszy closes his pale fingers around her arm. "I will guide your magic," he says. "Be calm."

The request is so dissonant that she laughs, shrill and desperate.

He sighs. "If I wanted you dead, you would already be dead."

"Comforting."

Her palms have begun to sweat, and she wipes them on her skirt. There was a time, as a child, that her magic filled her to the brim, a fluttering presence alive within her rib cage. Now, however, she can hardly sense a thing—merely an infinitesimal weight against her diaphragm, sprawled like a butterfly with its wings torn. She wants to recoil from it, like one might recoil from a gruesome carcass, yet a piece of her—morbid, traitorous—longs to reach out toward it. For once, she gives in to the temptation, reluctantly trying to grasp at her magic. The feeling makes her stomach churn, and memories begin to crowd in around her, pressing in, suffocating. Instinctively, Liska cringes away, and—

"Stop that," the Leszy snaps.

Liska opens her eyes. "But you told me to—"

"Do you think I am a fool?" he snarls. "Stop resisting. You cannot hide your magic from me."

Liska stares at him in confusion. "But—but I'm not. I'm trying to do as you asked, I swear it."

The demon's grip on her arm tightens. "Then why can I not sense a thing?"

Liska shrugs faintly, shivering under the Leszy's scrutiny. A branch arches over her head and snatches the book away—making her flinch—then retreats to hover over the Leszy's shoulder.

"Useless," he growls. "But... no. It is there, it has to be." There is a growing urgency to his words, an uncanny alarm. He sounds almost... panicked. But it is

gone before Liska can decide if she is right, as he leans closer and curls his hand into a fist. “Perhaps another way,” he says.

Suddenly there are branches at Liska’s ankles, around her neck, coiling, constricting. She cries out, struggling against them, but they hold her like ropes, their bark dragging painfully against her skin. The branches tighten and tighten, and panic seizes Liska. Has the Leszy changed his mind? Is he going to kill her after all?

No. No, she can’t die, not so far from home. Not after surviving last night.

Her magic flutters to life with wingbeats like thunder, fanning the anger burning in her stomach. Behind her, there is a loud *crack*, followed by the peal of falling glass. The Leszy jerks back as a glass vial streaks past him, narrowly missing his head, and shatters against the windowsill.

Seeing this, the demon laughs. He *laughs*, bright as a spark, and flicks his fingers. The branches retreat as quickly as they appeared, vanishing into cracks or coiling along the walls. Liska falls to her knees, gasping for air.

“Well,” he says, “it’s there. Some part of it, anyway, though it’s barely useful.”

“What do you mean?” Liska pants, shaking. “I don’t understand!”

The Leszy falls silent. After a pause, he crouches and hauls her to her feet. “Neither do I,” he admits. “Tell me, have you ever been able to use your magic? Not instinctively, like you did just now, but on purpose.”

“S-somewhat,” she admits, voice still weak.

“Somewhat?”

“Well... I used to be able to call for it. My mama is a healer, you see. She never trusted me to help around human patients, because of”—she gestures vaguely toward the shattered vial—“*that*. But I would treat our animals, or other villagers when they asked. If a horse foundered or a cow stopped giving milk, I could use my magic to figure out *why*. If I just let go a little, I could feel them, sense their fear or hurt, even see their memories.”

It was simple: all she had to do was lay her palm on an animal’s forehead and *focus* until she felt its emotions like they were her own. She’d known what she was doing was unnatural, nearly sinful, but she’d reasoned it couldn’t be so bad if she was using it for good. Foolish. So very foolish. That indulgence, that recklessness, had cost her everything.

“Anyway,” she says hastily, diverting her thoughts, “it wasn’t always wild like this. It was never easy to control, but... I managed. Mostly.”

“So what happened to it?” asks the Leszy.

Liska curls her fingers into her skirt. “I don’t know.”

He chuckles, a serrated sound. “And yet somehow you managed to lock your magic away, reduced it to nothing but a mad animal that lashes out on instinct. Impressive, truly. In my seven hundred years, I have never seen magic this broken.”

Broken. The word crawls into her chest, burrowing deep, resonating in places that ache with agreement. Still, she cannot help but be relieved. “Well, you have your answer now. I can’t do magic.”

“Not yet,” the Leszy agrees, visibly bothered by the realization. “But you will. Mark my words, fox: anything can be repaired, even this arcane affliction of yours. I will find a way to fix it soon enough.”

What if you can’t? Liska dares not ask. Better to let him think that her magic can be fixed. The last thing she needs is him reconsidering his bargain and realizing that he made it for nothing—that she cannot be whatever it is he wants. God willing, it will take him a year before he gives up, and by then the bargain will be fulfilled.

“I have all I need,” the demon says at last. His hands are clasped behind his back; he stares at his desk, already lost in thought. “Leave now.”

Liska could not be more eager to comply, yet she lingers a heartbeat longer. She cannot stop thinking of the way he talked about her magic, the way he seemed to almost *salivate* for it. The fetter around her wrist feels like it is tightening, mocking her for selling a year of her life to a monster and thinking his word was worth anything at all. A single question corrodes her thoughts like poison: *What, exactly, am I here for?*



Liska cannot focus on anything else as she wanders through the House Under the Rowan Tree, feeling much like a ghost haunting its abandoned halls. She watches a burgundy sunset drip over the Driada like spilled blood and lets her anger vanish with the sun. She is glad to see it go—anger is a treacherous feeling,

and it often triggered her magic as a child. There was a time when she had not understood how dangerous it made her. Not until one night, when she was seven years old.

Liska remembers the scene with acute clarity. It is young winter, fickle and frostbitten, and a wind has come down from the mountains, battering the cottage with gusts of first snow. But the oven spits cheerful warmth through the room, and everything smells of Mama's barszcz, made with rye leaven and dried wild mushrooms.

It is too cold now to sleep in the attic, so Liska sits on her parents' bed, and Tata is beside her, telling a story. Over time, his face has faded in her memory, but she remembers his twinkling eyes, honey-colored by the light of a guttering lantern. He has just finished her favorite tale, about a girl defeating the basilisk of Gwiazdno, and he begins to stand, gathering the faded covers to tuck Liska in.

"Another one!" Liska whines, tugging on his wrist. "Just one more, please!"

"I am tired, słoneczko," he says, shaking her off. "I must sleep too."

"But Mama's not back yet!"

"Mama may not be back for some time. The Prawotas' boy has a fever, and your mother's gone to see if she can help."

"Exactly!" Liska exclaims. "So you have time to tell me one more story!"

"No, Liska," Tata says firmly.

"Yes!" She kicks her feet, but Tata is already turning away. Furious, she reaches for the *thing* in her chest. She doesn't really understand what it is yet—she only started feeling it a few months ago. Sometimes it calls to her, fluttering faintly, whispering *use me* in dulcet tones. A few times, she used it to light lanterns from afar, until Mama got frightened and had them all pray the rosary, fearing a spirit from the Driada. Another time, Liska asked it to cover the windows in frost on a sweltering midsummer day. She'd shown Tata, expecting him to be proud, but he'd only taken her by the shoulders and made her promise never to do such a thing again.

Right now, she doesn't care. Full of childish pettiness, she wants her father to stay, so she calls on that one forbidden *thing*. From between the floorboards burst thorny tendrils, shooting upward to coil around Tata's wrist. He cries out,

and Liska shrinks back, alarmed. When Tata turns to her, his eyes are not honey brown but dark and troubled.

Liska curls in on herself, all her anger replaced by fright. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...” And yet she knows that isn’t true. She asked for this, she *did* this.

Sighing, Tata crouches in front of her, prying thorns out of his wrist. Pain shines in his eyes, but he does not wince, not even as rivulets of blood drip from his fingers. He hides his injured hand in his sleeve and reaches out to touch Liska’s cheek.

“Liska,” he says quietly. “I warned you last time, didn’t I? Now you see why. I know it’s tempting, but you must never do anything like this again, understand?”

Liska’s memory fades after that—she remembers crying herself to sleep in Tata’s arms. Then she startles awake as the door bangs open. An icy wind sweeps into the room, followed by Mama’s footsteps. Liska keeps her eyes closed, pretending to sleep. The door rattles shut, and her parents speak in hushed tones. A minute later, Mama draws in a sharp breath.

“This has gotten out of hand. We need to do something about it, we—”

“Dobrawa, wait. Wait! Don’t wake her. It’s all right, it was an accident. She knows what she did was wrong.”

“Wrong? This is beyond wrong. There are briars growing *in our house*, Bogdan! I have been a fool, trying to find logical explanations for all this. Nothing has happened since the window in August, so I thought... I thought it might have been some midsummer spirit escaped from the Driada—”

“I told you it wasn’t.”

“I will not hear it! Frost in the summer, candles lighting themselves, hundreds of birds at our windows... how can any of that be my daughter?”

“She’s using magic,” Tata says steadily. “Real magic.”

“It’s *not* magic,” Mama says sharply. “Liska is no witch.”

“Perhaps not the way we think of them. My babcia remembered a time when magic was more commonplace, and she would say that back then, witches were not so hated as now. She even had another name for them, though I cannot recall it.”

“Your grandmother told many outrageous stories,” Mama snaps. “She filled your head with them, just as you are filling our daughter’s now. She must have gone too close to the spirit-wood, and something has taken hold of her. I usually do not listen to Pani Prawota, but perhaps this time...” Mama trails off. “Never mind.”

“What did she say, Dobrawa?” Tata asks worriedly.

“She said... well, she said she’d seen Liska call a magpie to her hand, yesterday, without food to lure it. She said Liska was speaking to the bird, as if they were good friends. Of course, she told Pani Jankowa about it, and I’m sure that gossip has told half the village by now. If people start to talk... you know how superstitious they are. This is a Driada border village. Even the word ‘demon’ is enough to start a panic.”

A rustle of fabric, perhaps Tata taking Mama into his arms. “What do you suggest?”

“Tomorrow, we take her to church for an exorcism.”

Tata is quiet for a moment. “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“It must be,” Mama says. “What else can we do?”

“We teach her, and we must be strict about it. As long as she can keep... *it* a secret, she will be safe. After what happened today... I think she will understand.”

The next day, Liska was taken to the chapel, and the priest whispered prayers over her in grim and threatening tones. Liska remembers shaking all over, frightened by the tense atmosphere and the worried stares of her parents. In the end, the priest had only shaken his head, and Mama looked harrowed. That was when Liska knew that there was something wrong with her that could not be prayed away. The thing inside her, it made people afraid. She learned to stifle it, hide it, but there were times where it won. Times that made her thorns seem trivial, even harmless, in comparison.

The reminder makes Liska’s chest tighten. She exhales past the feeling, burying it as she looks out into the twilight. Around her the candles are flickering to life, while outside, the Driada’s shadows grow long and menacing, gnarled trees silhouetted against the fog.

It is sudden. One second the garden is empty, and the next it steps into view.

The hound with the red eyes.

It stands by the abandoned well, a shadow given form. Even so far away, even separated by a window and walls, Liska's heart flies into her throat. This time the hound does not disappear, not even when she rubs her eyes. Its claret gaze is fixed on her, its mouth gaping in a grotesque snarl.

Get out get out get out. The unearthly snarl grates against her chest, her very bones. *Get out before he wakes.*

“What are you looking at?”

Liska jumps, whirling away from the window. The Leszy is approaching from down the hall, his footsteps quiet on the worn hardwood.

“The—” She looks back into the garden, but the hound is gone. “You didn't hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Of course he didn't. She swallows, dread filling her. “Leszy... do you—*did* you—have a dog?”

“What?”

“A... a wolfhound.”

He tilts his head. “*Whatever* are you on about?”

“I just saw one. Out there. It's gone now, but...”

“Demons can take many forms, not-so-clever-fox.” He taps his antlers in emphasis. “You must calm yourself. The manor grounds are surrounded by wards: spells that guard against spirits. Nothing can cross them without my permission.”

“But it *did*. The hound... it came to me last night.”

At this, the demon stills. “Did it now,” he says quietly. Liska suspects he means to sound indifferent, but instead she hears wariness. “It seems that something slipped past me. My attention *has* been elsewhere these past two days. Just for you, not-so-clever fox, I will strengthen my wards. Whatever you saw, it will not trouble you again.” He pauses, bending until his head is level with Liska's, the cracks in his skull-face deepened by the candlelight. “I am the only one you can trust here. Remember that.”

Something about his words makes her skin prickle. Like the surface of a tranquil lake hiding a treacherous undercurrent, there is both threat and enigma

within, hidden depths best left untouched.

Liska cannot help but wonder what they hide.

She waits for the Leszy to leave before turning back to the window. Full darkness has consumed the garden, and the hound is nowhere to be seen. All is summer and stillness, yet it is far from calm—there is a thickness in the air, a penumbral stirring, as if the wood is watching her every move.

Fighting off a shiver, Liska abandons the window. During her morning wanderings, she had found a vacant bedroom opposite a locked door that likely led to the Leszy's sleeping quarters. That is where she goes now, to the empty bedroom across from the demon's. It feels safer than sleeping in the parlor again.

Candles perk up when she opens the door, illuminating a bedroom that is to her straw-stuffed mattress and attic room in Stodoła what a peacock is to an old pigeon. Overwhelmingly large, it has the same woeful elegance as the rest of the manor, with moss-green wallpaper and heavy furnishings of carved wood, a vanity set with a candelabra and a wardrobe against the far wall.

It seems to be some sort of guest room. Curious, Liska walks over to the wardrobe and pulls open the doors, expecting to find it empty, or perhaps used as storage.

Instead, she finds the strangest assortment of clothes. There is a linen shirt and a fur-lined coat, a wide doublet and a fox-fur scarf. On the bottom lies a discarded necklace, beside worn work boots and lovely heeled shoes. The clothes are from different times, and stranger still, of different sizes—they must have belonged to several people. Who were they? They could not have all been servants like her, not if the make of some of the clothes is any indicator. But if they were guests, why leave their belongings behind?

“What happened to you?” Liska whispers, running her fingers along the silken rim of the bonnet. The hound's warning returns to her: *Get out before he wakes.*

Liska puts the bonnet back and hastily closes the wardrobe, shoving the thoughts away. It is easy to be paranoid in the night, to see things that are not there and imagine the worst. The Leszy may not be kind, but if the earlier interrogation proved anything, it's that he needs her for something.

“I’m safe,” Liska asserts, as if she can will the House Under the Rowan Tree into protecting her. And who knows? Maybe she can. Maybe the wardrobe and vanity and bed all slumber, waiting to spring to life at the first sign of danger. The candles are sentient, so why not the rest?

These are childish thoughts, but they keep Liska company as she opens the chest at the foot of the bed and pulls out clean, if mildew-scented, bedding. A chemise falls out as well, adorned with so much lace and ribbon that it must be worth more than Liska and Mama’s wardrobes combined. Putting it on, Liska feels like a thief, an impostor wearing the clothes of another woman.

A missing woman.

When Liska blows out the candles and curls up to sleep on the too-big bed, she cannot help but wonder how many others have lain there before her.

NOTHING OF INTEREST TO A VILLAGE GIRL

AFTER A NIGHT OF FITFUL worrying and foggy nightmares of a red-eyed hound, Liska is roused by first light and birdsong—*birdsong*, which seems too innocent and mundane to belong in a spirit-wood. She makes quick work of her morning routine and heads to the kitchen, set on edge by every flickering shadow and praying the Leszy will wait until after breakfast, at least, to terrorize her.

After yesterday's exploring, she has stocked the larder, and the variety excites her. In the border villages, peasant fare is limited to cabbage and potatoes and grains; meat, milk, and eggs are meant for market, sometimes saved for illness or holidays. Still, Liska has always loved cooking, though she suspects her enthusiasm is lost on her contemptuous master.

If in the night the Driada is a cacophony, in the day it is a harmony. There are humming insects and tree-dampened sunlight and the soft drumming of branches against the kitchen window. Liska's work becomes an accompaniment as she kneads and flattens out a simple dough for flatbread, then fries eggs with boiled nettle on a pan while letting the flatbread cook on the stovetop. It is past eight when she finishes, but when she brings food to the Leszy and calls her apologies, he doesn't bother replying.

After eating her own meal Liska tidies the kitchen. There is still a piece of flatbread left, so she sprinkles it with salt, puts it on a small plate, and leaves it by

the stove. It will likely attract a mouse, but Liska still hopes that a clean floor and small offerings will be enough to summon a house-spirit.

She attacks the hallways next, and the parlor, and by midday she has brought the manor's lower rooms to a less miserable state. The cobwebs are gone, the windows are open, and the curtains pulled back. She could swear the House Under the Rowan Tree brightens up, the rooms growing sunnier, as if the manor has taken a deep breath for the first time in a hundred years.

She is turning into one of the manor's back corridors, lost in her thoughts, when she sees it. A dark door painted with stars, exactly the same as she saw yesterday in the kitchen. Liska halts with a gasp and rubs her eyes, half expecting it to disappear.

The door stays in place, the starburst doorknob gleaming in the fractured light of a narrow, cracked window.

"Stay there," Liska instructs, eyeing it skeptically. As if in response, the floorboards shift beneath her feet, urging her onward. She sucks in a breath, holds it. Curiosity wins over caution—she approaches the door slowly, each step more nervous than the last.

"Fox?"

The Leszy's voice comes unexpectedly from the hall. Footsteps follow, growing louder as he closes in. Hearing them, the door rattles agitatedly, the stars on its surface winking out one after the other. It seems almost... afraid.

"No, wait!" Liska makes a split-second decision. She rushes forward, reaching desperately for the doorknob.

Her fingers close around nothing. The door has vanished.

"So *this* is what I sensed."

The Leszy rounds the corner with slowing, meticulous steps. Liska tenses, but the demon is not looking at her—instead his face is tilted to the ceiling, in a posture that is simultaneously exasperated and threatening. "What do you think you're doing?"

Liska opens her mouth to answer, but before she can say anything, the floor under her feet grumbles. The candles puff out, the wood-paneled walls groan indignantly, and she could swear the flowers on the wallpaper begin to wilt.

“You tried it once and failed,” the Leszy continues. “Did you not learn your lesson? You slumber for two hundred years, and *now* you decide to cause mischief. Obstinate, senile thing you are. Go back to sleep and do not try anything like this again, lest I decide renovation is in order. Perhaps I will knock down a few walls.”

The manor shudders like a frightened dog, and Liska bristles. She rounds on the Leszy in reproach, but he puts up a long-fingered hand. “That place is not meant for you,” he says icily. “Do not return to it.”

Without another word, he stalks off the way he came.

Liska holds back a growl of frustration and turns to the wall. “Come back,” she whispers, but the house reverberates with frightened silence. She bites her lip, trying to process everything she just saw. The House Under the Rowan Tree... it seems to be... *alive*. And that door... this is the second time it has tried appearing before her. What lies beyond that the Leszy does not want her to see?



A day passes, then another, but the midnight door does not reappear, no matter how Liska coaxes and pleads with the walls and staircases and shadows. By the third day, she gives up and returns her full attention to putting the manor in order. As for the Leszy, Liska has only seen him twice a day: ill-tempered as he leaves the manor, and even more ill-tempered as he returns, doing God knows what wicked work demons get up to.

It is on the morning of the third day that he corners Liska and shoves a dried sprig of thyme in front of her, along with the book from his study, open to the restoration spell.

“Again,” he says simply.

And so Liska, setting aside her broom, tries once more to cast a spell. Like last time, when she reaches inside herself for her magic, there is no response. No spark of power, no fluttering sensation, nothing but lurking memories she refuses to look into. Nothing happens, not when the Leszy puts a hand on her shoulder and mutters something under his breath, not even after he hands her a stoppered bottle of some pungent herbal concoction to drink. In the end, all she gains is a bitter taste in her mouth.

The Leszy watches her remorselessly as she rinses her mouth at the sink. He gives no indication that she has frustrated him, not in his voice or his demeanor. It is only after he exits that Liska finds the sprig of thyme, crushed to pieces on the counter as though by a clenched fist.

That afternoon, Liska rests on the porch steps, broom leaning against her knees and sweat sticking her blouse to her back. The rowan tree stretches its boughs overhead, a damp breeze slipping through them to gnaw on her skin. She can see the Leszy's fern from where she sits, towering but unremarkable among the untended shrubbery, dull without the light of its flower.

The legends are true. She imagines telling that to her family, to Marysieńka—recounting it like the freshest village gossip, like a drunken story overheard at the inn. Homesickness wakes inside her. She remembers reenacting the fern flower myth many times with her cousin, picking wild daisies to tuck between broad-leaved weeds and fighting off imaginary demons before announcing their wishes.

If only we could go back to that time, Liska thinks, *when we were young and full of stories.* Gazing into the shadows of the ever-restive woodland, she escapes into a memory of better days.



Liska and Marysieńka sit on the communal pasture beneath the old elm, watching smoke billow from distant village chimneys. It is early spring, the air woven with winter's last threads, and they are both bundled in shawls and oversized wool coats.

“Do *you* think the Leszy is real?” Marysieńka muses, with all the wisdom a nine-year-old can muster. Before them, their makeshift fire has burned down to white coals, and she uses a stick to dig out potatoes they buried in the embers. “Or is he just a story to keep us all out of the Driada?”

“He must be real,” Liska decides. “If other demons are, why not him?”

“Well, you know that story Dziadek always tells. Of when he nearly died in the Driada.”

It's their grandfather's favorite story—when, as a boy, he had gone after his family's goat when it had wandered into the spirit-wood. He'd left a tithe for his safety in the wood, but he'd still been attacked by *something*. Dziadek had

claimed it'd had horns, but little else could be seen in the darkness. He'd barely gotten away with his life, and the goat was never seen again.

"The Leszy didn't protect him," Marysieńka goes on. "He's supposed to, if you leave a tithe."

"He's a demon," Liska says with a shrug. "Who knows what he thinks or does?" She gives her cousin a mischievous grin. "Maybe what attacked Dziadek *was* the Leszy. Some say he has horns, you know. Because he's cursed."

"Cursed?" Marysieńka's brown eyes glimmer with intrigue. "How?"

"Well." Liska mimics the whimsical tone Tata always uses when telling stories. "They say the Leszy has no heart. They say a tree grows in its place—it wraps its branches around his bones and grows out of his head." She puts her thumbs to her temples, mimicking antler tines.

"That's not true." Marysieńka juts out her chin. "You need a heart to live, don't you?"

"Not if you have magic," Liska says. "Anyway, it's just a story. Tata heard it from his *babcia*, and everyone always says she was a little mad."

"I wish my tata told stories like yours," Marysieńka says wistfully. "All he ever talks about is crops and weather and crops and weather and—oh! More crops." She hands Liska the slightly cooled potato and takes the second for herself, leaving both their hands blackened with soot.

"Crops can be interesting!" Liska says, biting into the potato. The burnt flesh parts between her teeth, the soft insides hot on her tongue. With her mouth still full, she adds, "I'm sure wheat has *many* fascinating properties we ought to be educated on as proper young ladies."

Marysieńka rolls her eyes, and Liska wonders at how her cousin can make the act so... pretty. Everything Marysieńka does is pretty. It can't be hard, with her flaxen hair, rosy cheeks, and wide, fawn-brown eyes.

"I'm tired of crops," Marysieńka declares. "One day, I'm going to move to the city and never think about them again."

"You can't leave!" Liska exclaims. "What will I do then?"

Marysieńka licks her fingers. "Come with me, obviously!"

"But I don't *like* the city," Liska protests. "I like it here. Besides, Mama would certainly disapprove. She disapproves of *everything* these days. If I talk too loud,

if I slouch, if I ask too many questions—” Liska knows in her heart that Mama is right. If Liska attracts attention, then someone could notice all the strangeness about her, notice her *magic*. But it doesn’t make it any less frustrating. “Sometimes I think if she could cast a spell on me and turn me into a better daughter, she would.”

“Whatever are you on about?”

They turn at the sound of a familiar voice. Marching toward them is Tomasz Prawota, the carpenter’s son, wielding a long stick and ushering along a herd of noisy geese. *He looks like them*, Liska thinks with distaste, *with his long neck and thin arms. He even waddles like one!*

Tomasz pauses in front of them, flicking his stick back and forth. “My mama said you shouldn’t talk about magic, you know. She says you’re asking to summon *lich*o.” *Licho*, demons of misfortune. Liska has never seen one before, but sometimes Tata says the name as a curse.

“Though I’m not surprised *you’re* talking about it.” He narrows his eyes at Liska. “Mama says there’s something odd about you. Says you inherited it from your tata, most like.”

The Prawotas and the Radosts have never gotten along, a clash between Tata’s bold, free-spirited personality and the Prawotas’ vehemently conservative views. Pani Prawota is known for her excessive piety, often scolding other villagers for observing pagan traditions, like leaving offerings for house-spirits and celebrating *Kupała*. She thinks it invites demons. Tata calls her a superstitious hag. Liska doesn’t care about their feud; she only wishes Tomasz would go away.

“*Licho...*,” the boy repeats, a terrible grin sliding across his face, “*Licho. Liska*. Even your name sounds similar! No wonder you’re so strange. You shouldn’t be friends with her, Maryś, or it’ll rub off on you.”

“How can you say that?” It’s Marysieńka who leaps to her feet, fierce as a flame. “There is nothing wrong with Liska! *You’re* the strange one!”

“I don’t talk to things that aren’t there,” Tomasz says haughtily. “Anyway, there’s no point listening to anything you say. You’re probably under one of her spells.” Smiling smugly, he takes advantage of Marysieńka’s pause of rage to strut

back to his geese, his stick dragging in the dirt behind him. Marysieńka starts after him, but Liska tugs on her sleeve.

“Come on,” she says, trying very hard to ignore the heat in her own chest. “Don’t mind him.”

“Aren’t you mad?” Marysieńka demands, slumping back down and crossing her arms. “He’s so mean!”

Liska shrugs. “He’s silly. You can’t summon things just by talking about them. If you could, I would have a dragon all to my own, and I would keep it as my pet. Then I could send it after Tomasz to burn his ugly butt.”

Marysieńka giggles. “Now *that* I’d like to see.”

Liska grins back, but it is strained. Worry knots in her chest, her childhood insouciance peeling away as she realizes the implications of Tomasz’s words. Pani Prawota is still suspicious of her, which means Liska is going to have to be twice as careful now. Best that she never, ever speak of magic again. Not even in stories.



The broom clatters to the ground from Liska’s slackened fingers. She twitches, realizing she has begun to doze off with her head propped on her hand, burdened by nights of little sleep. Marysieńka’s giggle lingers in her thoughts, but it is warped now, the memory yanked out of Liska’s grip and replaced by another:

Marysieńka, older now, standing frozen and wide-eyed with her lovely features distorted in a scream.

Liska bolts to her feet, shaking her head. The image clings to her, haunting the edges of her mind as she bends down to collect her broom. *I didn’t mean for it to happen*, she thinks, trying to ground herself back in the present.

Didn’t you? her mind whispers, relentless. *And what about the other time?*

Before Liska can wade into those dark thoughts, the manor door slams open. She whirls to see the Leszy sweep out onto the steps, his pale sukmana undone, fastening a belt around his waist. Not just a belt—a sword belt, the like of which she has never seen, buckled with a bronze clasp and holding an emerald-studded sheath, the grip made of intertwining branches clutching a sparkling geode.

The demon does not stop in his tracks, not until he looks up, his eyes—or rather, eye sockets—landing on Liska.

“What are you doing out here?” he demands.

Liska clutches the broom like a weapon. “Wandering, I suppose.”

“Ridiculous.” Snarling, he closes the distance between them. “Get inside. Lock the door. *Do not come out until I return.*” When Liska falters, he shouts, “Now!”

The urgency in his voice is enough to get her moving. She half runs, half stumbles her way over the threshold and slams the door behind her, sliding the locks into place. She waits for a time, heart pounding in her ears, before peeling her back from the door. Minutes pass, then more, time stretching, gathering in the air. An hour, and the Leszy is still gone. Two. Liska attempts to find some solace in simple tasks, peeling potatoes and heating the previous day’s rosół. In the end, she barely manages a few mouthfuls of food through the turning of her stomach.

“Where are you?” Liska whispers, watching through the window as night falls. She does not know what worries her more—what will happen if the Leszy returns, or what will happen if he doesn’t. Frustrated, she paces through the main hall, rubbing her face.

When she looks up, the hound is there, an arm’s length away. Their eyes meet, and it peels its ruined lips back from vicious, knife-sharp teeth. Its hackles rise. It smells of brutal death, of ashes and festering wounds.

He wakes, it growls.

The locks on the door suddenly unlatch themselves. The candles flicker, off then on, and in that millisecond of darkness the hound has disappeared.

The doors slam open as if buffeted by wind. The Leszy is there, a swaying silhouette of antler tines and slumped shoulders, dragging his sword behind him. Branches halo his form, rising from his back like wings of bone. When he steps over the threshold, they fall to the ground and retreat into the darkness.

“Leszy,” Liska says, hoarse and horrified.

He turns on his heel and slams the doors closed. Their shutting echoes like a thunderclap.

For a time the demon simply stands there, arms drooping, a marionette with its strings cut. Then he throws his sword aside and leans his forehead against the door.

“Leszy,” Liska tries again, wavering like candlelight. “What happened?”

“Nothing of interest to a village girl,” comes the scathing reply. He straightens and moves one hand to clutch at the opposite arm.

He’s injured. She cannot see blood, but it’s in his posture, the cautious way he holds his body. Liska knows lameness—she has treated horses and oxen enough times to recognize it.

“Leszy,” she says a third time, this time with all the authority she’s heard Mama use, authority she does not feel.

“Don’t.” His voice is low and rough. “Bring food to my study and stay out of my way.”

When he stalks past her, he is stiff and straight-backed, lacking the feral fluidity she is used to seeing. Obviously he is hiding pain, and he is not very good at it. Once he is gone, Liska notices the trail of reddish droplets left in his wake.

Blood? No, it’s too translucent. She crouches beside one, touching her fingers to it. They come away sticky, fragrant with pine.

Tree sap.

SCARS AND DUTY

“LESZY, WAIT!”

Liska gets to her feet, wiping her hand on her apron, and runs after the Leszy. She may mistrust him, but she is a healer’s daughter, and she cannot stand the thought of anyone being injured. Even if they are awful and rude, and terribly messy besides.

She finds the door to the Leszy’s study cracked open. There is more sap smeared on the doorknob, and the room beyond is unnervingly silent. She hesitates, heart pounding. Does she dare? But then, what does she have to fear anymore? Death surrounds her. She will encounter it one way or another—she might as well taunt it.

She pushes open the door.

The Leszy is lying prone on the floor. He is inches away from his desk, his skull-head turned at a near-unnatural angle, one hand outstretched as if reaching for something. Disembodied branches lie limp around him. Reddish sap is smeared across the back of his sukmana and the sleeve of his shirt, and his breaths are audible, wheezing.

Liska does not hesitate. In that moment, he is just another injured creature, and instinct overtakes her. She is on her knees, pulling at the Leszy’s sukmana, trying to wrestle it from his broad shoulders. But he is tall and well-muscled, and his body lies limp and heavy. “Leszy,” she calls. She pokes his neck, then pinches it. Nothing.

“Wonderful,” she mutters.

A trip to the kitchen and back ends with Liska standing over the demon with a butcher's knife, hacking the coat from his back with little elegance. What she finds beneath makes her suck in a horrified breath—there are three brutally deep slashes, carving a ragged trail from the nape of his neck, across his shoulder, and all the way to his upper arm. He must have taken his coat off for whatever fight occurred, because unlike his sukmana, his shirt is rent to pieces, torn into strips of ragged linen. There is more tree sap slathered over the injuries. Over them? No. She stifles a gasp as yet more sap bubbles out of the wound, oozes slowly across his shoulder blade.

His blood.

Liska recoils, then shakes her head. Questions can come later. First she must treat the wounds; they are vicious things, red and inflamed and filthy with debris.

“God, Leszy,” she whispers. “What did this to you?”

She cannot move the demon more than a few inches, so she leaves him where he is. Instead, she runs down to the kitchen and sets a pot of water boiling, then takes a pillowcase from her room and tears it to strips, boiling those as well. The sun is nearly set now, but she rushes to the garden nonetheless, too heated to notice the chill of night.

Her mind races. There was yarrow growing wild, she remembers seeing it—yes, there it is. And plantain, that will help with healing. What else could be useful? Perhaps some honey from the larder, and she has garlic, too—along with the weeds, she can make an improvised poultice, though she does not know how effective it will be against his injuries. She brings everything back to the Leszy's study, cursing the many steps of the tower as she goes.

The Leszy is still as she left him, only bloodier and paler. When she kneels at his side, she is dismayed to see the wounds are turning black, the color spreading across his back like anthracnose over ash leaves. Poison, some kind that she has never seen before.

One thing at a time, Liska. She takes a deep breath and sets to work. There is debris in the wounds, filth from the claws of whatever carved them. As she cleans them, water and blood-sap soak the stone beneath her knees, the bowl of water quickly turning crimson.

Just as she is about to finish, the Leszy stirs. He coughs, then groans, pushing himself upright. With the movement, the deer skull over his head detaches from his antlers, slips free, and drops to the floor.

Liska backs away, stunned, her hands and shirt sticky with his blood. When the Leszy turns to look at her, she exhales sharply.

Oh.

He's just a boy.

Well, a boy with antlers.

For a heartbeat, Liska is rooted by shock, unable to peel her eyes away from his face. His skin is waxy, ill, his white hair slick with sweat, but he looks no more than a few years older than she. He might have been lovely, with his high cheekbones and long lashes, but there is a cruel curl to his mouth and a low set to his brows that echoes the disdain constant in his demeanor. His eyes are what gives away his demonic nature; there is something unhinged about them, green as fern leaves and narrowed with suspicion. They remind Liska of a wildcat's.

"What do you think you're doing?" Even now, his voice is taunting and haughty. Boy or not, he remains absolutely terrible.

"I'm trying to help you." Liska tries to channel Mama's firmness, but instead her words sound soothing and hesitant, like she is talking to a wounded animal. "Your... Leszy, your back is turning black." And it is. The spots are spreading as they speak.

The Leszy curses softly. "There is a green bottle on my desk. Give it to me and leave."

Liska rises to her feet and surveys the desk. Sure enough, among a clutter of stoppered vials and inkwells and quills, there is a small bottle filled with sickly green fluid. She picks it up and returns to the Leszy's side. He has braced himself against the desk, his skin radiating fevered heat. When Liska presents him with the bottle, he downs it in a single gulp.

Liska focuses on his wounded back. "These need stitches, Leszy. Do you have any thread?"

"Get out," he says through clenched teeth. "I don't need your help."

She is exhausted. *He* is exhausting. "And are you a contortionist? Because I don't think you can reach your back on your own."

He rounds on her with a growl. Eyes clash, periwinkle to pine, sky to woodland dark. They are at a standstill, wolves measuring each other up before a fight. Then the Leszy exhales heavily, his shoulders slumping in surrender. “In the closet to your left.”

It takes some rummaging, but she finds a small sewing kit. She picks out the thickest thread and sturdiest needle, then goes to clean both before returning to the Leszy. When she pierces the skin around the smallest wound, he stifles a moan, his back muscles spasming.

Liska winces. “Do you have anything for the pain?”

“Just do it,” he growls. “I need them closed so they’ll heal faster. They’ll be gone in a few days.”

Liska sighs and resumes her stitching, trying to ignore the demon’s occasional flinches and his martyred expression. Blessedly, the potion seems to be working—as she sutures the wound closed, the black spots fade and vanish. The Leszy remains kneeling, his forehead pressed against the drawers of his desk, clutching the wood so tight that his nails leave grooves in the varnish. Finally he fades out of consciousness, his eyes flickering closed and head lolling.

When Liska finishes, the strange black corruption is gone from his back, replaced by her own, uneven sutures. It will scar, but it will certainly not be his first—as she contemplates her handiwork, she begins to notice other pearl-white marks scattered across his shoulders and back. There are scratches, grooves, even crescents of teeth marks: the map of a story she doubts he has ever told. A part of Liska wants to study them, study *him*. He *is* rather pleasant to look at when he isn’t looming or scowling.

“You’re ridiculous,” Liska tells the demon as she spreads her poultice over the wounds and does her best with her makeshift bandages. “What did any of this accomplish? All you did was bleed everywhere, you useless demon.”

“You’re the one who can’t keep her nose out of a demon’s business,” comes the weak reply. “You useless girl.”

Liska startles—she hadn’t noticed him waking. “I—” she begins to explain herself, then falters. Why does she fear him? He can hardly keep his head up. “If I had kept my nose out of your business, you would have bled out on the floor!”

He grimaces. “I preferred you when you were quiet.”

“And *I* preferred you when you were a deer.”

He makes a sound that is halfway between a laugh and a groan.

“There.” Liska ties off the last of the bandaging—it’s awkward-looking, but covering such large wounds is difficult. She sets a hand on the demon’s unwounded shoulder. “Can you stand?”

“In a moment,” he says.

She nods, then dares a glance at his face. His features are drawn, his eyes distant and troubled.

“Leszy,” she asks, “what happened?”

His answer is a reluctant, weary growl. “Duty.”

“Duty?”

“You knew who I was when we first met. Surely you know what I do.”

“You are the warden of the Driada,” Liska replies, tentative.

He snorts. “Warden is one word. Jailer is another. And like any jailer, I keep order among prisoners. Only mine are all the demons of Orlica, trapped in this accursed woodland.”

“Then those wounds...”

“Lovely, are they not? Courtesy of a strzygoń.”

Liska looks up, alarmed. *Strzygoń*—vengeful demons born from souls that died tragic deaths. The stories vary in telling how they look, but seeing the state of the Leszy, she never wants to find out.

“The Driada,” the Leszy continues, eyes distant, “cuts across all of Orlica, in some places separating its lands, in others dividing it from Litven. Traveling it cannot be avoided, so I created several wide paths through. I have warded them, just like I ward this manor, but my magic is not infallible. At times my spells crack, or wear thin like limestone beneath water. And these demons... they can scent magic like a hound smells blood. They know when a ward breaks, and sometimes they manage to get through.”

She is reminded, suddenly, of the red-eyed hound. She considers telling the Leszy that she saw it again, that whatever wards are on the manor, they must have broken too. But something stops her—perhaps recklessness, perhaps caution. The hound has yet to harm her, and telling the Leszy about it was rather useless last time.

“I thought you commanded the wood,” she remarks instead.

“The wood, yes,” says the Leszy. “The demons, however, are trapped by it, and they want nothing more than to get out. Today there was a caravan of merchants passing through, transporting exotic spices to Litven all the way from Orlica’s port. That strzygoń”—he gestures to his back—“must have found a crack in my magic weeks ago, must have been waiting for the right moment. Sometimes they are easy to dispatch, but this one was powerful, so powerful it could disguise itself as a human. It pretended to be one of the merchants, attacked me when my guard was down. Regardless, once it showed itself, it was easy to kill. Those men will go home with nothing more than bruises and a story no one will believe.”

Liska looks away, surprised and somewhat softened by the revelation. The Leszy risked himself to save human lives, and this is clearly not the first time. *Duty*, he called it. Can she truly blame him for being so callous if he has spent uncountable years fighting monsters?

Beside her, the Leszy grunts and begins to struggle to his feet. Quickly, Liska slides her arm beneath his, offering him support. When her fingers touch his skin, he starts, his lips curling with an emotion she cannot read.

“All right?” Liska asks softly.

His expression shutters, turning cold and resolute. “Just help me to my room.”



The Leszy does not let Liska enter his chambers—he simply unlocks the door with a wave of his hand and limps inside. When he tries to close the door in Liska’s face, she wedges her foot against the frame.

The Leszy fixes her with a glower.

“Don’t lock the door,” she says.

He raises an eyebrow skeptically.

“If you collapse again—”

“I won’t.”

“But if—”

“I *won’t*.” He begins to shut the door. “Good night, fox.”

Thunk, and Liska is alone.

She wrings her hands, then throws them up in exasperation. Why is she worried? He's a demon. He can take care of himself if he is going to be so stubborn. She stomps off to her own room and halts in the doorway, realizing she is still sticky with blood-sap. Exhaustion seizes her, along with a homesickness potent as any poison. Suddenly she misses the steady certainty of Stodoła life, the crow of roosters in the morning and the scent of Mama's herbs.

Mama. Liska did leave a letter explaining her intentions before running away from the village, but she knows that her mother will still be furious. Dobrawa Radost was never tolerant of disobedience, and Liska ruined not only her well-ordered life, but also her well-ordered plans for Liska's future.

A memory rears its head: Mama's stare, sharp as ice picks, and the blue haze of evening slipping beneath tightly closed shutters.

"What's this for?" Liska asks, as Mama slides her a few coins over the dinner table.

Her mother sits back. "Tomorrow morning, saddle up Stara and ride for Gwiazdno. Radosław, my cousin—you remember him, yes? His wife's sister-in-law is a housemaid for a wealthy family, and they are looking for a new laundress. I managed to secure you the job."

"Laundress?" Liska should not be surprised—she's been expecting this conversation ever since she overheard Mama and Father Paweł. Still, anticipating a slap does not lessen its pain, and Liska feels the words like a physical blow.

"Yes, laundress," Mama says firmly. Her fingers are laced, each knuckle hoarfrost white. "Radosław does not know of your abilities, of course, so you will have to be very careful."

"I know," Liska says feebly. Beneath the table, her nails dig crimson crescents into her palms.

She has not been to the city often, but the few times she has it frightened her: crowded apartments and stinking streets and an ever-present din of harried workers. Liska cannot imagine herself among them, raw knuckles and tired eyes, earning a pittance for pay. She will have to live in constant vigilance, praying her magic does not cause another tragedy. And she will be completely, utterly alone.

So she makes her plan. She waits for the villagers to be distracted by Kupala Night's wild celebrations and slips away unnoticed. And now she is here: making dinners for a wood-demon and trying to keep herself—and *him*, apparently—alive.

A year is worth it, Liska reminds herself, and heads to the bathroom to scrub off the Leszy's blood.

HOUSE-SPIRITS

SOMETHING IS WRONG IN THE kitchen.

That is the first thing Liska notices through sleep-heavy eyes, walking into the dreary room to the sound of dying rain. The world beyond the window is colorless, the canopy slick and dripping. Kept up by an onslaught of worries and an equally violent thunderstorm, a minute passes before she notices that everything is out of place.

Not *very* out of place, just shifted enough to make Liska wonder if she is losing her mind. No, she could swear it—the glasses on shelves have been rearranged and the manor’s expensive old porcelain moved to stand at eerily perfect intervals. The herbs Liska threw about during last night’s panic are bundled up and hung neatly from the rafters.

The plate she had left on the ground with flatbread is empty. When she stoops to pick it up, something blinks at her from the shadows of the stove.

Beady eyes black as coal, and a row of flat teeth bared in anticipation.

A *skrzat*. So there is one after all. Liska straightens and moves away quickly, lest she incur the little spirit’s ire by looking at it too closely. The creatures are benevolent but temperamental, and a displeased *skrzat* can be worse than a poltergeist.

Despite her weariness, she smiles softly. “Thank you,” she calls, setting down the empty plate. She does not turn around—she can feel the spirit watching her, and she does not want to frighten it.

Something about stormy days makes time feel like it is slowing. Liska moves drowsily through the kitchen, preparing a simple breakfast of porridge and herbal tea as raindrops tap their watery rhythm along the windowpanes. She is about to take the meal up to the Leszy's room when the demon walks into the kitchen, ducking his head to avoid hitting his antlers on the low beams.

The first thing she thinks is: *Ah, so he did not collapse after all.*

The second is: *Oh, Lord have mercy.*

The Leszy is not wearing his mask. Liska does not dare ask why, does not have the energy to try deciphering the demon's motives. But seeing his human face in the daylight, without adrenaline pumping through her veins, without fearing he is about to *die*, is a whole new experience.

Liska knows very little of men. It was Marysieńka who fawned over boys and enjoyed their attention, while Liska was busy trying to keep her magic a secret. Marriage is an inevitable thing for village girls, but Liska always ignored it—she assumed it would come like death, arriving when least expected and stopping her life in its tracks. As long as she married a Stodoła boy and remained in her hometown, it didn't matter much.

So she knows little of men, and tries not to notice them either. But there is something about the Leszy that drags her eyes toward him, denies her reprieve. He is not handsome the way some village men are handsome: all hard lines and square jaws, calloused hands and proudly grown moustaches. Instead, the Leszy seems ethereal, untouchable—a breath fogging on a cold morning, the moon against a hazy twilight. Slender face, hair like alabaster, eyes bright and wicked green. His is a treacherous beauty, a rusalka's beauty—enthraling and deceitful, good for nothing but tragedy.

Liska shakes her head and looks down at her fingers, clenched around the mug of tea. When the Leszy remains silent, she forces herself to look again, this time matter-of-factly, and survey him with a healer's eye. He looks far better than last night—he still holds himself stiffly, cautiously, bandages showing from beneath his loose shirt, but he has recovered faster than she expected.

“How are you feeling?” Liska asks, breaking the nervous silence.

His eyes widen a fraction, as if the question is unexpected. “Fine.” The reply is awkward, lacking its usual hauteur.

“Is... is there anything I can help with?”

He looks down to where she left the bowls of porridge. “Is one of those mine?”

Liska nods shyly and slides a bowl toward him.

He peers at it studiously, as if it’s the first time in a hundred years that he’s seen porridge and doesn’t quite remember what it should look like. Then he touches the bowl and murmurs under his breath, a single word in a strange, lilting language. In a flash of green, the porridge stops steaming. He picks up a spoon and begins to eat.

Liska tilts her head, startled that he used magic for something so mundane. She cannot help but be envious: her powers have always been an untamable beast, while the Leszy controls his with meticulous precision, like a dose of medicine measured to the drop.

“How do you do that?” The question slips out before she can think better of it, and she regrets it immediately.

The demon smirks, licking off his spoon. “What’s this? A good, pious girl, suddenly curious about witchcraft?” He wags the spoon at her. “I told you. Magic is the art of manipulating souls.”

“But that’s porridge,” she says, flustered. “How could it have a soul?”

The corner of his mouth tilts up. “We’re czarownik, not-so-clever fox—we can reach beyond the mortal veil and into the realm of spirits. To us, everything has a soul. If I touch an object, it will absorb some of my magic and develop a miniscule soul of its own. Take this spoon, for instance. Now that I have held it, it has an infinitesimal, temporary piece of my magic within. I can ask it to vanish”—the spoon disappears in a flash—“or reappear.” He is holding it again, green light swirling around his hand.

Liska’s heart gives an anxious jump. “Does that mean it’s... alive?”

He twirls the spoon over his thumb. “No. If I left and came back, that little glimmer of life would be gone. But if I used it every day, paid special attention to it... eventually, it might develop a small sentience of its own.”

She thinks of the House Under the Rowan Tree, with its unusual dust and disappearing doors and candles that light themselves. “Like the manor?”

“Exactly like the manor,” he replies.

She clasps her hands together, disconcerted. Father Paweł was right—magic is unnatural. Unnatural, yet so very tempting. It draws her like a moth to a flame, and she can only thank God that she somehow locked away her magic, otherwise she might not be able to resist.

“What is it, fox?” the demon says laughingly. “You look like you’ve swallowed a bird and it’s trying to fly out again.”

“Doesn’t it feel wrong to you?” Liska blurts out. “Changing things that should not be changed, disobeying the laws of nature?”

“Disobeying?” The demon chuckles. “My dear fox, I am merely guiding them. I can only affect the souls that allow it. All I do is give them a command, and they will either obey or not, in any way that suits them.”

“That language you spoke earlier...”

“Godspeech, the language of the first tribes. Orlican and Litvenian both stem from it.”

The first tribes—that is no story. Not much history was taught in the village, but there was one piece every child learned: the arrival of the first king to Orlica and his quest to unite all its pagan tribes. It was not an easy task; they worshipped different deities, frequently quarreling among themselves. Their conflicts eventually diminished after the king converted to the Faith and the Church took root in Orlica. Over years, pagan traditions and holy ones blended together, minor deities receiving the names of saints and pagan rituals becoming incorporated into the Church’s holy days. Red ribbons, weavings of straw, offerings to spirits—these are remnants of Orlica’s pagan past. So is magic.

The Leszy recognizes the understanding in Liska’s face. “The name comes from the term ‘old gods,’” he explains, “another name for the primordial demons worshipped by the pagans. It’s said those demons taught humans to use magic. Whether that is true is unknown, but their language remains particularly effective for formulating spells.”

Liska licks her lips, both unnerved and increasingly curious. “And you can control... anything at all?”

He rocks back in his chair languidly, putting his hands behind his head. “Some things have simple souls, eager to be used. Earth’s four elements are the easiest, because change is in their nature. Living creatures are usually too

complex. But within those constraints... yes. I can do anything.” His eyes flash slyly. “So, not-so-clever fox, tell me what you want. Beyond your bargained-for wish, of course.”

“What?” Liska narrows her eyes. “Why?”

“Because I owe you a debt. For... ah, last night.”

God forbid he admits I saved his life, Liska thinks, barely resisting rolling her eyes. She knows better than to want or trust any gift from a demon, especially one made with magic. Still, she is feeling somewhat testy.

“A garden,” she decides. “With fruits and vegetables and herbs, enough to last the winter.”

“A...” He rubs his temples. “Of course. What did I expect? Something befitting an all-powerful demon? No, of course not. I have razed battlefields and summoned storms and created wonders from magic alone, but she wants me to grow cabbages.” With a long-suffering look of regret, he uncurls from his casual position and rolls his shoulders. “Are you sure?”

She nods, holding his gaze stubbornly.

“So be it, then.”

His eyes drift closed, the exasperated scowl vanishing from his face as his brows knit in concentration. He crosses his wrists in front of himself, then lowers them to his sides, hands opening and curling into claws.

The earth *stirs*. It ripples and swells like a breath—the floorboards moaning and gasping—then falls in an exhalation that makes the trees outside shudder, throwing off droplets that patter across the roof. Turning to the window, Liska can tell that something outside has shifted, though she cannot see much beyond the honeysuckle crowding the glass.

She gives the Leszy a surprised—and deeply skeptical—glance.

He gestures to the door. “Go see.”

To say Liska is hesitant is an understatement. So far, nothing involving the demon has been pleasant—she has been threatened into a bargain, blatantly ignored, nearly strangled by branches, and then drenched in blood. She practically tiptoes toward the door and pulls it open with the caution one might use to catch a high-strung stallion. Beyond is the now-familiar sight of the looming Driada trees and distant wrought-iron gate and—

And the garden.

The weeds are gone. As if they were never there. In their place are overgrown rows of strawberries with fruits like rubies, thorny gooseberry bushes rich and ready to harvest, beet leaves poking out from the soil, a forest of parsley and cabbage, and more and *more*. There are flowers, too, beautiful red roses blooming in a disorderly but abundant flock. Even the air has changed, scents of soaked boscaje and ancient moss joined by hints of sweet pollen.

Liska rushes down the stairs and whirls to survey it all, her skirt flaring around her. She turns back to the Leszy, and she cannot help but smile. For the first time since her arrival, she feels truly awed by his magic, without an underlying edge of trepidation to ruin it.

The Leszy, in turn, sketches a dramatic bow. Liska notes he is wearing an identical sukmana to the one she hacked to pieces—or perhaps it *is* the same one, repaired by magic. His eyes, dazzling in the canopy-muted light, have taken on a peculiar glint.

“Does this satisfy you?” he asks.

“It’s lovely, truly.” She turns again, practically bouncing, the soil underfoot still wet and springy with rain. “And—oh! Are those apple trees? But how can they have fruit already? It’s not the season.”

“It is the season when I say it is.” He lifts his chin with self-satisfaction. “This is the power of a wood-demon, not-so-clever fox.”

“Then why not do this before?” Liska asks, stilling. “Why let it all come to such a state?”

He shrugs. “I simply do not care for it. What I care about is repaying my debt, and I have done just that. Farewell now, and enjoy your cabbages.”

He moves to duck inside the manor, but Liska refuses to let him go so easily. “Wait!” she calls after him. “Do... do you even *need* to eat?”

She does not know where the question comes from, but she needs to know. If he could have created a garden on a whim, grown any food, then why not provide for himself? Why let it all fall to squalor and decay? It does not make sense. *He* does not make sense.

“Of course,” says the Leszy, crossing his arms.

“But you do not seem interested in cooking.”

“No. That’s what *you* are here for.”

“But what about before?” She thinks of the wardrobe, the abandoned clothes. “Was there—was there someone before me?”

He hesitates, and his expression becomes overcast. “Yes,” he admits. “I’ve had other... companions before you.”

The way he says “companions” is skewed, tainted with a lie so dark that the garden seems to lose its vibrance. Liska’s fervor withers with it. “What happened to them?”

“What happens to everyone,” he says curtly. “I’ve been bound to this creation of mine for nearly seven hundred years. At this point, death is more familiar to me than life.” He straightens, pulling at his lapels. “That is enough of your prying. I do not ask about your past, and I warn you not to dig into mine.” The last words drip with threat. This time, when the Leszy turns back to the manor, she does not stop him.

She goes to survey her new garden, but her wonder has dimmed. When she picks a strawberry and bites into it, the juice is almost sickly sweet, and she cannot help but wonder if the Leszy’s gift is meant as a diversion—if he thinks the color and redolence will distract her from the mystery clouding the manor like a gathering storm.



A few days later, Liska has an idea.

She is in the kitchen, the curtains drawn over the window to keep out the harsh sunlight. It pierces through even the thickest canopy, wilting greenery and announcing that summer has arrived in all its regalia—golden fields and ever-dragging days and the surging drone of insects.

Liska is not very fond of summer—in Stodoła, it meant hay baling season and the dangers of heatstroke at sweltering noon. As healers, Mama and Liska both had their hands full, nerves frayed and arguments frequent. And with increased misery came greater superstition, villagers quick to blame demons for the smallest misfortune. Father Paweł would roll up his sleeves, bring out a Bible and holy water, and exorcise anything from cattle to houses to villagers—be they truly possessed or not.

It does not help that Liska has spent the last thirty minutes wrestling a fork back into shape—the last of several she found horribly bent that morning, along with white-capped fungi growing all over the stove. As she sets the fork aside, she throws a glare to the corner, where a pair of coal-black eyes watches from the shadows with wry satisfaction.

“Was this necessary?” Liska laments, gesturing to the ruined cutlery. “You’re a spirit. You don’t even *need* to eat.”

Another mushroom sprouts on the stove in warning. Liska puts her hands up in surrender. “All right, all right, I apologize. I won’t forget again.”

The skrzat does not move, and it does not speak, but its silence somehow manages to feel both categorically offended and blatantly smug.

In the past days, Liska has seen the house-spirit only once. Unlike the one in Stodoła, this one takes on a female shape, a wry old *babcia* no bigger than Liska’s hand—black-eyed and soot-smelling with a habit of vanishing if looked at directly. Liska calls her Jaga after the witch of legend, which has turned out to be too apt, judging by the disaster she wrought in revenge for a forgotten offering.

“Ridiculous,” Liska mumbles. Despite her best efforts, most of the forks remain slightly deformed, though she doubts the Leszy will notice. She turns one over, wondering. Are offerings truly this important to spirits?

“Is there something I could give *you*?” Liska tilts her head up to the ceiling, addressing the manor at large. Ever since the Leszy threatened it, the House Under the Rowan Tree has felt... withdrawn, somehow. Last night, it hadn’t even lit the candles in her room—she’d had to do it by hand. Still, the midnight door has been on her thoughts, and since no amount of pleading has convinced the manor to disobey the Leszy again, perhaps she can offer it a bargain instead.

But what to give a *manor*? Not bread, surely. The structure is clearly enchanted... what if she offered it the one thing they have in common: magic?

The mere thought of it makes her gut coil with apprehension. Then again, she reasons, if she is going to try using magic again, it might as well be now. There is no one around to hurt if something goes wrong.

And there is no Leszy to glower over her shoulder, either. The demon is not at the manor now—she saw him leave earlier, wearing his sword and following a white sentinel-moth. Perhaps to fight a demon, perhaps to check on his wards,

he never bothers telling her. What matters is that now Liska is alone, and he cannot stop her.

She springs to action, grabbing a small knife from the counter—she has developed a habit of always carrying one—and tucking it into her apron. She heads for the back of the manor, to a place the Leszy is unlikely to visit: the old sitting room.

It's a medieval-looking chamber, with golden wall sconces shaped like swans and ebony furnishings upholstered in sapphire. A black bear's pelt lies snarling before the hearth, and faded tapestries cling to the walls, depicting famous legends: the dragon beneath Aniołów Castle, crystalline Szklana Góra towering above mountains veiled in mist, a white eagle appearing before the first king of Orlica, gleaming like snow against the sunset.

Liska rolls her shoulders and positions herself between two of the tapestries, pressing her hands against the wall. Beneath her fingers, the wood paneling is notched and surprisingly warm, and she can almost imagine it swelling as the manor breathes.

Closing her eyes, she digs into herself, trying to call her magic like she used to when communicating with animals. This time she is far more forceful than she was in the Leszy's study, pushing past waves of dread, ignoring the agonizing crush of memories that seem to gather around her.

She cannot reach it. Liska recoils, gritting her teeth, and she tries again, then once more, but her magic remains stubbornly hidden, nothing more than a deadweight at the bottom of her chest. She huffs in frustration, resting her forehead against the wall. In her mind, warning voices have begun to churn, reminding her that using magic is wrong, always wrong, so deeply wrong.

Among them is a memory, a sweltering day in August. A few weeks have passed since Father Paweł's arrival in Stodoła, and he has taken it upon himself to teach the catechism to the village children every Sunday. He is new, and young, and Liska has found herself seeking his guidance after her peers have gone home.

"Liska Radost, yes?" he asks, finding her lingering in the nave. "Can I help you with something?"

She hesitates. "I wanted to ask if... why..." How to ask her question without revealing her secret? "Why some of us are... different."

“You are called by magic,” he says. At Liska’s horrified expression, he puts out a placating hand. “Your mother came to speak with me yesterday. She told me about your struggles.”

“Oh.” Liska looks away, cheeks burning. She does not know why she is ashamed that someone else knows, yet she is. But also glad—glad that the new priest did not immediately condemn her.

“Father,” she asks. “Do you think God hates me?”

His smile is benevolent, slightly bemused. “Whatever would make you think that?”

“Because... why else would He make me cursed the way I am?”

His eyes soften. “It’s not a curse, little one.” He kneels in front of her, looking up. “It’s merely a challenge. We are all given burdens in life. God simply gave you a heavier load, because He believes you are strong enough to carry it. Your magic is a test, and you must resist it at all costs.”

“I know that,” she whispers. Mama always repeats it, and the reminders have only doubled after Tata’s death. *Be careful, Liska. Stay out of trouble, Liska.* She does not argue—in her hands, magic has only caused destruction. But sometimes she wishes for a more logical explanation, a calculated reason that is not based on fear alone.

“You are wondering why,” Father Paweł observes. “Listen, Liska. Magic goes against the laws of nature, changing things that should not be changed.” He pauses, as if considering how much he should tell her. “It’s done by calling upon spirits, and to do so deliberately is witchcraft. The Church forbids it, because the most eager spirits are always agents of the devil. It’s especially dangerous for girls like you.”

She listens intently, wide-eyed. “How come?”

“Because women are more susceptible to temptations of darkness.” She remembers him saying something like it once in a sermon. Eve with the apple, the origin of sin. “Even in the days of kings, when people had yet to realize the evils of witchcraft, most practitioners of magic were men. It is assumed the women were too weak of will and easily corrupted by demons. They went mad.”

Liska thinks of Tata’s stories; of Baba Jaga and her hut with chicken legs, eating children or stealing hearts. Perhaps there is a grain of truth in those tales.

Her stomach twists at the thought. “Does that mean I’m wicked too?”

“No, no.” He puts a hand on her shoulder. “You are a good girl, and you know to keep away from your magic. If you are ever tempted by it, Liska, you can come to me. I’m here to help you.”

His expression is kind, yet his eyes are intense, almost frightened.

Liska can never forget those eyes.

They appear in her thoughts now, fixing her with an accusatory stare as she tries to call her powers one last time. She heeds their warning, taking her hands away from the wall. Guilt crashes through her. For the first time in a long time, she’d *wanted* to use her magic. It tempts her still, despite everything she has done.

“Perhaps another way,” she says, standing back and taking the knife from her waistband. As she does, a foreboding prickle rushes up her neck, her hair standing on end.

She is being watched.

Liska drops her hand and goes still. “What are you doing out here?” she says.

God, let me be right. She turns, slow and tense, then breathes a sigh of relief. An ash-colored cat is standing on the back of a couch, flicking its tail back and forth. Its eyes are all black, black as coals, and when it grins, it is an all-too-human expression filled with flattened, all-too-human teeth.

Appeasing my boredom, says the not-quite-cat. *Or would you prefer I grow more mushrooms?*

It does not open its mouth to speak, but its voice rings clearly in Liska’s mind: smoky and feminine, crackling like firewood. Liska has never heard such a long sentence from a skrzat before. Normally they communicate in short, annoyed exclamations, but this one—Jaga—puffs herself up with abnormal intelligence. *What? Have you never heard a cat speak?*

Liska smiles tentatively. “You surprised me, is all. I thought you were the red-eyed hound.” She has not seen the hound since the night the Leszy was injured, but she is still wary.

Red-eyed hound? Jaga hops off the couch and struts across the room. *Yes, I believe I sensed something of the sort.*

“Do you know anything about it?” Liska asks. It strikes her that she is asking a spirit-cat about a ghost-dog.

Nothing but foggy images from the in-between, says the skrzat, mere smoke from a candle. What do you know of it?

“Only that it wants me to leave the manor,” Liska says. “‘Get out before he wakes’: that’s what it says to me. Who is ‘he,’ I wonder?”

Jaga flicks an ear. *I do not know. I’m just a cat.*

“No, you’re not.”

The spirit bares her teeth again, a spine-tingling expression that is all wrong and rather menacing. *No, I’m not. So are you going to explain what you’re doing with that knife?*

Liska fixes the wall with an exasperated glare. “I’m trying to convince the manor to show me a door.”

That sounds very sane, Jaga remarks. I see you plan to stab yourself out of desperation.

Liska grins slightly. “More or less. I was hoping I could offer it my magic in trade, but my magic is, as the Leszy so kindly put it, useless. He said it’s in my blood, too, so—” She presses the knife to the pad of her index finger and winces. A drop of blood wells out, gleaming crimson-slick in the daylight. Sending up a quick prayer, Liska touches her finger to the wall.

Bleeding on the walls, Jaga says dryly. Brilliant.

Liska does not reply—she is afraid to even breathe, her body coiled tight with anticipation.

A second passes. Another. A third.

Then the room heaves a great, reluctant sigh. On the wall, her bloody fingerprint vanishes, absorbed like water into soil.

Liska blinks, and the midnight door is there, as if it was never gone. The stars on its surface twinkle mysteriously, the starburst-shaped knob gleaming the purest gold.

She leaps to her feet in triumph, heart thrumming. “See?” she says to the manor. “I knew you had it in you.” Sticking her bleeding finger in her mouth, she glances to the spirit at her side. “Are you coming?”

I would not miss this for the world, Jaga replies, mischief clear in her eyes. Go on—quickly, now. We do not have much time.

Before she can lose her nerve, Liska opens the door.

THE MANOR WITH A SOUL

WHAT WAITS BEYOND IS A vast hall that is half forest, half wonder.

Underfoot, the floor is cold marble, dark and traced with golden veins. It would be sophisticated, were it not for the moss thick along the walls and the wildflowers growing through hairline cracks. All around Liska, sturdy trees stand noble as kings, their branches splayed to support a rib-vaulted ceiling. Golden motes of light float between their boughs, illuminating vines of honeysuckle that crawl down the walls and drape along towering bookshelves.

The hidden room is a library.

Along the walls are uncountable books, a world's worth of knowledge, thick tomes and thin novellas bookended by skulls or geodes or jars of beetle shells. The whole room smells of mystery, of old paper and wild berries and lively summer skies.

In the middle of the room hangs a swing, suspended from the ceiling by thick rope and laden with silk pillows. Though there is no wind, it rocks back and forth with gentle creaks. Jaga hops onto it, sharpening her claws on the seat, while Liska approaches, wide-eyed with amazement.

“What is this place?” she asks.

This is not a place, says Jaga. This is a memory. A fragment of the manor that the Leszy put to sleep.

“He seemed desperate to keep me out of here.” One of the golden lights floats past Liska. She tries to touch it, but it zips away from her fingers. “He nearly succeeded, too. Why? Why hide such a wonderful place at all?”

Perhaps you would find out if you stopped gaping and looked for answers, Jaga suggests. Though it sounds like she is still nearby, the skrzat is actually sitting on a shelf all the way across the room. Liska has no idea how she got there so fast.

“Aren’t you a house-spirit?” she calls. “Shouldn’t you know everything about the goings-on of the manor?”

Jaga narrows her eyes to void-dark slits. *Perhaps once I might have. But when the Leszy began to neglect the manor, neglect me, I faded. And so did my memory.*

“You remember nothing from before I summoned you?”

Well, I remember finding the Leszy an infuriating old toad.

Liska suppresses a grin, looking around carefully as she approaches the bookshelves. She trails her fingers over the spines, relishing the richness and variety of textures, from leather to velvet to silk casings, to occasional scrolls arranged in perfect little piles.

“It’s clean,” she says in realization. “It hasn’t fallen to ruin like everything else.”

When you hide a space like this away, it enters an ageless slumber, Jaga explains. *This room has hibernated for two hundred years, removed from the laws of time. It seems the manor was tired of hiding it.*

The manor, tired. It’s still difficult to wrap her mind around.

“It must take a wood-demon’s power to bring a whole manor to life,” Liska muses, picking up a jar of shed snakeskins and holding it up to the light.

Wood-demon, Jaga says. *He always calls himself that, though he is very poor at actually being one.*

“What do you mean?”

Most demons feast on human flesh.

Liska puts down the jar clumsily, and it nearly falls off the shelf. She scrambles to right it. “But the Leszy doesn’t, does he?”

No.

She exhales. “That’s a relief. But... why do other demons do that? Why do they need to eat when they are already dead?”

It gives them power. Jaga disappears in a puff of woodsmoke and materializes a few sections down, curled over a hulking, ugly tome labeled DEMONOLOGIA. *That is the difference between a spirit and a demon. Spirits gain power from offerings of food, demons from human flesh. Spirits are given power, while demons take it.*

“And souls?”

Belong to bodies.

Suddenly Liska has a thousand questions, about things she does not know and things she has been told. She wants to ask more, but one of the motes of light overhead winks out, then another, as if the House Under the Rowan Tree is telling them to hurry. Glancing across the library, Liska beckons to Jaga. “Come, let’s look around and get out of here. The last thing we need is the Leszy catching us.”

They hasten their exploration until they reach an alcove at the end of the hall, where a semicircle of glass provides a view of the rowan tree. The alcove shelters a vast writing desk, a chair upholstered in black velvet, and a jar full of quills. Beside the jar stands a candle in a brass holder. It has burned to a stub, drowned in a pool of its own wax. Liska examines everything carefully, then opens the drawers. Finding them empty, she crouches to look under the desk, then beside it. Still nothing.

A bright speck appears at the corner of her vision. One of the library’s golden motes floats down beside her, hovering before the desk’s drawers. Liska follows its light, leaning down until her cheek presses against the floor, and sucks in a breath.

There is a piece of paper there—it seems to have drifted beneath the drawers and gotten stuck. After some struggling, Liska manages to shove a quill into the crack and gently push it out.

She inspects her discovery by the mote’s golden light. It’s a stub of old parchment, burnt at the edges, tiny pieces breaking off at even the gentlest of movements. There are words written upon it, fragments of a letter of some sort, done in a dramatic, curling hand. Anticipation hums in Liska’s chest. Carefully, she gets to her feet and lays the paper out on the desk, forcing herself to take a calming breath before reading it over.

*...end it was inevitable, you know it was.
I ask only that you do not hate me for leaving you
like this. It was always to be my fate.
Live well, my love. Forget me once I am gone.*

—Florian

Gooseflesh pricks at Liska's arms. She looks up in alarm, meeting Jaga's eyes. The skrzat looks unfazed, and her composure placates Liska's nerves.

"Florian..." she repeats, tracing the page's edges. The name tastes sorrowful, like lost love and broken hearts. "Jaga, does that name mean anything to you?"

No, says the skrzat, her feline features twisting into something like a frown. *But I think I have seen that paper before. Perhaps if I...* She pads up to Liska and nudges the paper with her nose. A shudder goes through her, and she jumps back with a hiss.

"What is it?"

Jaga blinks a few times, looking stunned. *When skrzaty fade, we lose our memories. But sometimes things linger, smells or feelings or strong emotions. Sometimes even images.*

Liska eyes the little spirit cautiously, feeling that she should not interrupt. Jaga's obsidian eyes are unfocused, clouded with memory. She sways from side to side, the edges of her shape blurring into smoke.

The Leszy..., she says slowly, as though reciting a poem. *He is standing over this desk. He is holding a long piece of paper, a—a letter. He gets to his feet, and something falls out of the letter. He doesn't look at it.* She speaks faster and faster, as though the memory is slipping away already. *There is a candle burning on the desk, and he touches the letter to it, but as soon as it begins to burn, he seems to regret it. He throws it to the ground and tries to stomp out the fire. He falls to his knees, and the burnt pieces all scatter. He is... shaking? His face is wet. Angry, perhaps. I do not know human emotions; I cannot explain....*

"He's weeping." Liska is stunned by the thought. A demon, weeping? She cannot imagine the Leszy's sharp features ever showing such emotion. "What

else?”

It's... He looks around himself. He tries to gather the burnt pieces. He finds the thing that fell out of the letter, cups it in his hand. It's a flower, I think. Then he turns and sees me watching. He shouts at me to get out, so I do. That is all.

“That is all...,” Liska echoes. She reads the fragment over again, hoping distance might reveal some secret that she missed. The first line, the *it was inevitable, you know it was*, strikes her like the pounding of a drum. There is such finality in those words, such resignation.

“That cannot be all,” she says. “This letter... this place... the manor must be trying to tell me something.” She can almost feel it, from the lights above and the marble beneath, all waiting tensely, begging her to listen. There is urgency there, a restless warning.

“This Florian, whoever he was... I need to find out what happened to him.”



Liska slips the piece of paper back where she found it, just in case. She takes one more longing look around the library, then heads for the exit, praying the Leszy has not yet returned. Jaga follows on her heels, and the midnight door vanishes as soon as they both step out. Overwhelmed and buzzing from her discovery, Liska collapses on the divan. Jaga hops up on her lap and begins kneading her skirt, the cat's claws catching on the fabric.

“Jaga,” Liska says, surfacing from the torrent of her thoughts. “If we found other things that trigger your memory, could you remember more details about what happened?”

It is possible, Jaga replies. But the object would have to have emotional ties to the event somehow. It cannot be, say, a chair.

“How about that flower? The one you said fell from the letter.”

That did seem meaningful, Jaga muses. Though I hardly understand the sentiment behind a plant. Food would be far less pathetic.

Liska ignores the last bit. “Do you remember what species it was? Maybe if I found a similar one in the garden—”

That is not specific enough. The object must be a part of the memory.

Something tugs at Liska's mind, but she cannot put a finger on it. "Can you describe it better? The flower, I mean."

If cats had eyebrows, Jaga would have raised them. *Pale blue. Six... no, five petals. Rather wilted.*

"A forget-me-not," Liska murmurs. "Where have I... oh." It comes back in a rush. She'd been nervous, but it had seemed peculiar even then. "The Leszy, on his desk. There's an orb... a glass sphere. I think the flower inside was a forget-me-not. Could it be the same one?"

Jaga looks intrigued. *Perhaps.*

"If it was, would you need to touch it, like you did the letter?"

The closer I can get, the better.

Liska straightens, considering her options. "If we could sneak in while the Leszy is out—"

Impossible, Jaga cuts in. Only he can open that door.

"Maybe I could convince the manor to open it."

No. His study and his bedroom have additional wards on them, locks only czarownik magic can undo.

Liska has already begun to form a plan, a plan perhaps even more foolish than running into the Driada on Kupala Night. "Can you get in if the door is opened for you?"

Possibly, but if he's there, he will sense me.

"Could you get out on your own?"

If the door is open, yes.

Liska taps her finger against her chin. "I think I have a way."

Jaga narrows her eyes with the sheer delight of a cat on the prowl. *What do you suggest?*

THE GIRL WHO CRIED HOUND

I'M TELLING YOU—THIS IS not going to work.

“Seven,” Liska says, the word punctuated by the sound of a pebble tumbling down the tower staircase, scuffed by her boot. “You’ve said that seven times now.”

I should have never agreed to this, Jaga grumbles, burrowing deeper into the pocket of Liska’s apron, where she is hiding as an ink-black mouse. According to the skrzat, the Leszy’s wards prevent her from materializing into the room—she will have to physically enter it.

“You seemed all too eager about it last night,” Liska points out, lowering her voice as she reaches the top of the stairs. “What changed?”

I heard your plan, Jaga hisses.

“It will work, I promise. Now hush before he hears you.”

He will not, if I speak only into your mind. But how are you going to lure him out?

“Easy.” Liska gives Jaga a half-forced, not-quite-convincing grin. “I’m going to use my feminine wiles.”

Then she throws herself against the Leszy’s door and wails at the top of her lungs.

“Leszy?!” She injects all the panic she can muster into her voice. “Leszy!”

To her surprise, the door opens immediately, letting a blast of white light into the dim stairwell. “What is it?” The Leszy stares down at her, looking as though she has startled him out of some sort of experiment. His shirt is rumpled, the ties at the collar undone, and there is a smear of charcoal on his cheekbone.

Liska gazes up with wide, entreating eyes. “I think—I saw the hound again. In the gardens.”

You’re overdoing it, Jaga warns. But the sudden light has left Liska’s eyes watering, and her tears must look convincing indeed, because the Leszy’s face hardens.

“Impossible. Where was this?”

He begins to step out of the room, but Liska has made sure to stand as close as possible, forcing him to step around her. As he does, she swallows nervously and reaches out and grabs his shirt like a frightened child. *Keep your eyes on me*, she prays. She feels the barely-there weight of Jaga vanish from her pocket, scuttle down her skirt, and leap off. “It was b-by the cellar, in the shadows. I saw his eyes, I swear it!”

She tightens her fingers on the linen—she can feel the warmth of his skin through it, the exact moment his heart thuds in tandem with hers. He looks down at her hand and pries it off carefully, grimacing. “Calm yourself, not-so-clever fox. You are under my protection here.”

I see it, Jaga’s voice rings through Liska’s thoughts, muted by distance.

Excitement surges through Liska. She turns her attention to the Leszy as he smooths out his shirt brusquely. “Show me where you saw it.”

Behind Liska one of the Leszy’s enchanted branches splays its twiggy fingers against the door and shuts it firmly, trapping Jaga inside.

Keeping up the act, Liska guides the demon to the welter of nettle that frames the cellar door, where a spindly plum tree casts shivering shadows. The Leszy stares at it for a deep, unhappy minute before making a gesture that looks as though he may hide his face in his hands. He reconsiders it quickly and runs them through his hair instead, throwing the white locks into disarray.

“There is nothing here. I see nothing, I sense nothing. You must have imagined things, fox. Have... have you been sleeping properly?”

She has not been, and she knows it shows in the mess of her hair and the shadows under her eyes. She gives him her best sarcastic look and says, “Yes, actually. I have *lovely* dreams every night. Do you care to hear about them?”

“Spare me,” he says tiredly, and that is the end of that.

To Liska’s great dismay, the Leszy does not return to his tower, so Jaga remains trapped inside. Instead, he heads deeper into the estate grounds, past the rowan tree and into the untended grove that guards the rear-bordering wall. He does not explain what he is doing, but Liska can tell from the watchful light in his eyes that he is making sure she did, in fact, imagine the hound.

That hound... The breeze blows a stray curl into her mouth, and she pushes it back. *I do not think he would be nearly this paranoid if it were just another spirit.*

The Leszy’s world has become a never-ending wheel of mysteries. Demons and magic and doors and hounds, and on and on it goes, a clockface with peculiarities instead of numbers. *Tick, tick*, and the arms point to one puzzle. *Tick, tick*, and another.

The wait is agonizing. Half an hour passes sluggishly, and Liska occupies her time making gulasz from a tithe the Leszy brought back: two freshly killed hares left by hunters. One hour. She finds a jar of sugar in the larder. A second hour. She gathers enough strawberries for preserves. A third. She cuts the strawberries, shovels them into an iron pot, and douses them heartily with sugar, sticking one in her mouth.

When Jaga finally reappears, Liska nearly chokes on the strawberry. *That was close*, the skrzat pants, transforming from mouse to cat in an angry puff of smoke. *But it seems fortune is on our side, because I managed to run out of the room before he noticed me.*

“Thank God,” Liska breathes. “And did you—did it work?”

Jaga inclines her head, her eyes beads of polished onyx. *I remembered him*, she says. *I remembered Florian.*



They agree to wait until late, until night drowns the forest in a surge of tar-black darkness and a heavy wind skims its belly over the rooftop. Liska pretends to sleep, if only to keep the Leszy off his guard, and waits until she hears his

bedroom door click shut before tiptoeing back to the sitting room in her nightgown. Jaga is already waiting, a shadowed, barely-there thing mingling with smoke from the dying hearth.

“Tell me,” Liska says, and the manor’s walls seem to tilt inward, as if they, too, are listening attentively.

There was more to that memory. Jaga’s shape cannot seem to settle, now a wisp of smoke, now a human silhouette limned in firelight. Florian... I liked him. That itself is strange, because I do not like many people, but I liked him. He was warm and bright, like a flame. He lived here, at the manor, for a long time. In my memory, I followed him as he entered the library, as he left the letter on that desk along with the flower. It was nighttime, I recall, and I was begging him not to leave, though I do not know why. I remember the last words he said to me, as he set that flower down: “I am sorry, hearth-spirit, but I cannot stay any longer.”

I never saw him again. But there was one more time I saw the flower, after the Leszy found it. I was in the tower room, I remember, and he was holding it in his hand, already encased in that glass orb. I was reprimanding him for letting the manor fall to ruin. I said, “You cannot mourn forever.”

He flinched as if something pricked him. “His blood is on my hands, hearth-spirit.”

Liska clasps her hands over her mouth.

“And you cannot change that,” I replied. He grew furious in an instant. He turned around, and he had salt in his hand. He struck me with it, and I burned all over. That is where my memories end—all of them.

“He banished you,” Liska says quietly. It is one of the many things Stodoła children learn: salt will banish an unwelcome spirit. Pani Prawota once threw a handful at Liska when she was taking Stara out to graze, early in the morning when no one else would see. “He banished you because of Florian. Because Florian *died*. Jaga, I’m so sorry.”

The house-spirit looks startled. *Sorry? A peculiar choice, to apologize for another’s sins.* Her smoky form floats across the room until it coalesces at Liska’s feet as a cat. *I will not take your apology as his. You called me back and fed me, let me experience more of life than any dead creature should. But him... he is dangerous.*

“I know that much,” Liska says with a tense laugh. “But you don’t... you don’t think he actually *killed* Florian, do you?”

I don’t know. But keep your wits about you, girl. She pins Liska with a grave look. *This time I managed to get out before the Leszy caught me, but it’s only a matter of time before he realizes what you are doing. And if he realizes that... if he finds out his control over the manor is slipping... there is nothing that boy hates more than losing control. I fear what he might do.*

The knot of nerves in Liska’s stomach tightens, but she holds Jaga’s gaze nonetheless. “I’ll be careful, I promise. I have this feeling that... that if I can find out what happened that night, how Florian died, then I will know what the Leszy’s plans are for me.”

Jaga inclines her head. *Very well. I will help you if I can, for Florian’s sake and yours. But you cannot trust him, girl. Do not forget what—* She breaks off with a hiss. *He is coming.*

The house-spirit melts into smoke just as the Leszy’s footsteps become audible. Panicking, Liska curls up on the bear-pelt rug and tucks her head between her arms, pretending to have fallen asleep by the fire. Through a crack between her hands, she watches the demon stride in. The light falls on his face, and she could swear she recognizes an edge of panic to his expression before he notices Liska lying on the ground and smooths it into his usual stoicism.

“There you are, not-so-clever fox. I have need of you.”

Liska raises her head, pretending to blink groggy eyes. The Leszy does not wait for her to respond, merely moves to leave again. Then, he falters. Slowly, meticulously, he turns back toward the hearth, raising his chin like a hound scenting prey.

Liska’s stomach sinks as his attention lands on the barely there wisp of smoke that is Jaga. “Ah, so I did sense something after all. My unruly hearth-spirit.”

Jaga hisses, spitting up soot.

The Leszy chuckles, all menace and no mirth. “Why am I not surprised you summoned it back?” He angles his head toward Liska.

Liska holds his gaze, albeit shakily. “*She* has a name.”

“Does she now?”

Liska looks back at the skrzat. “Her name is Jaga.”

A flicker of amusement plays on the Leszy's mouth. "Truly, not-so-clever-fox, with every day you baffle me more." He gives one last look to Jaga, eyebrow quirked, then turns back around and beckons to Liska. "That's enough tarrying. We have a matter to attend to, you and I."

Anxiously, Liska collects herself off the ground and follows the demon, pausing in the doorway to say goodbye to Jaga. But when she looks over her shoulder, the house-spirit is no longer there—there are only crooked shadows and a dying hearth, and a thousand questions wavering in the dark.

The Leszy is already in the foyer when Liska catches up to him, shrugging on his sukmana. His emerald-studded scabbard juts out from beneath the coat's long edge, gleaming lethally in the dark. Seeing it, Liska hesitates. "Where are we going?"

"I need you to look at a body."

She stops abruptly. "What?"

He pauses, then turns to her with near-inhuman speed. When he takes in Liska's alarmed expression, he stills, shedding some of his intensity. "Ah, perhaps I'm being indelicate." He meets her eyes carefully. "My sentinels found a body at the edge of the woods—a villager, likely another victim of a strzygoń. I'm hoping you can tell me where he's from, perhaps even identify him."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"He was killed on a Sunday—he is still wearing Sunday strój. They differ by town, do they not?"

"Yes, but..."

"You could recognize some."

"Some, perhaps. From the villages near mine."

"That will do. You will have to come to the woods with me. All right?"

The final "all right" is a tentative inquiry. Liska wavers, taken aback by the fact that he seems to be asking her consent, not to mention her *opinion*. The number of times anyone has done *that* can be counted on one hand. Yet caution holds her back, as does the knowledge of Florian's death. She trusts the Leszy less than ever, but if she begins to act suspicious now, he will realize that something is wrong—that she isn't the perfectly naïve village girl he thinks she is.

She also cannot ignore the urgent edge to the Leszy's voice, the slight unspooling of his usually firm gaze. In truth, the likelihood that she can identify the villager is slim, but he is clearly shaken enough to ask for her help, and Liska can't ignore that. She never can.

Slowly she nods her agreement.

"Good," he says. He takes an old cloak off the coatrack and tosses it to her. "We must be swift, before the wolves find it."

Wolves. There is something odd about the realization that the Driada, for all its villainy, is also a forest, a home to woodland creatures. She hears birdsong every morning and has seen ruddy squirrels flash through the trees—why wouldn't there be wolves as well? Once, the thought of wolves alone would have been enough to frighten her. Now it's almost a comfort. *Oh*, she wants to say, *it's just wolves. Not a strzygoń or a rusalka, thank God.*

The Leszy's deer-skull mask is leaning against the coatrack. He picks it up and beckons for Liska to follow, stepping out of the manor. While Liska lingers beneath the manor's warm glow, he fastens the skull over his head and rests his hand on the pommel of his sword. Faint green light dances along the sockets of the skull, between its cracks and upon his shoulders; the disembodied silhouettes of branches curl and coil across the ground in tandem with his shadow. Like he did upon their first encounter, the Leszy begins to *change*.

Though the process is swifter this time, it is no less macabre. His body rots and shrivels and falls apart, then bends and reforms into a cervine shape. Muscle and flesh regrow in the blink of an eye until the stag stands before her, pearl white against the dark. Nothing remains of human Leszy but those predatory pine-green eyes, at odds with the dainty muzzle and subtle tilt of his head. "Quickly now," he says, bending his forelegs to kneel. When Liska falters, startled by the action, he rolls his eyes. "Get on."

Liska scrambles onto his back, wincing as she nearly slips off and instinctively grabs at his fur. "Sorry," she murmurs, then allows a faint grin. "Have you ever considered a saddle?"

The Leszy snorts. He rises with a single, powerful motion and takes off without a warning.

They are through the garden in a matter of strides, the crooked gates opening before them with a rasping lament. Then they gallop into the Driada, the Leszy's hooves thundering upon the cobblestones like a racing heartbeat.

Liska ducks low against his back, cloak billowing out behind her and pulse thudding in her ears. Though she spent much of her childhood riding bareback on Stara, being astride stag Leszy is nothing like that. His movements are more leap than gallop, powerful and sure-footed as he bounds over a fallen trunk and avoids blackberry thickets.

They are moving unnaturally fast—soon her vision fills with tears against the sting of the wind. When she wipes them away on her sleeve, she sees that they are headed directly into the path of a thick oak, so wide in breadth that it would take half of Stodoła's villagers to encircle it.

“Leszy!” Liska screams, but he does not stop. Ahead, the oak's trunk ripples and splits. The bark peels away like an opening door to reveal a gaping hole—and on the other side, a foreign wood.

The Leszy lowers his head and plunges through the opening.



DOORS TO THE DEAD

THEY EMERGE TO AN UNFAMILIAR Driada. The night is less oppressive here, the moon a razor-thin smile in a star-freckled sky. Around them rise pine and cypress like needle points, the breeze knit from sap and the cold fishiness of lake water. Liska knows this air—they must be four or so hours by cart travel from Stodoła, close to the mountains. One of her aunts lives in a village nearby.

The Leszy slows to a walk, then a smooth stop, allowing Liska to slide shakily off his back. She clutches his shoulder, breathless.

“Impressed?” he asks, amused.

“I think I might be going into shock.”

“I do have that effect on women,” he says casually. “Most people, really.” He shrugs Liska’s arms off and steps over a downed branch, his hooves muted by the blanket of needles. Once she has recovered enough to follow, Liska asks, “How did you do... any of that?”

“With magic, of course. It took more strength from me than I would like, but tonight haste is of the essence.”

“And you can do that anywhere? Travel anywhere?”

“In a sense. I can open spelldoors from the wood to anywhere in Orlica.”

“Spelldoors,” Liska murmurs, looking over her shoulder at the place where they emerged. Where previously it had been an oak tree, now it is a slender fir with drooping branches. No sign of the hole—*spelldoor*—remains. “Of course.”

“Don’t you know?” the Leszy says, wry and enigmatic at once. “Anything can be a door. You simply need to know how to open it.”

The words remind Liska of the hidden library, of Florian. She falls back, letting the Leszy take the lead and mulling over the day's discoveries, trying to decide on her next course of action. When the Leszy pulls up abruptly, she nearly stumbles into him.

"It's here," the demon says grimly, all former levity gone. He starts forward, and Liska watches nervously as he descends a small dip in the earth toward a crooked pine. One of his sentinel-moths flies after him, its wings glowing brightly, but even with the light it takes Liska a moment to comprehend—to *accept*—what she is looking at.

There is a body slouched against the tree's roots. Smearred in blackened blood, it paints a portrait of brutality: shredded flesh peeled back like an apple's skin, rib cage wrenched open to reveal pulpy innards, slick entrails stretched to strings and draped across the forest floor.

Liska has seen death before, but she has never seen it like this, so violent, so unjust. Horror grasps her with claws of iron, and she cannot help the pained gasp that escapes her.

"So?" The Leszy steps up to the corpse, looking at Liska expectantly. "I know it's not pretty, not-so-clever fox, but I did warn you."

"I know." Liska swallows, forcing her feet to move. She descends toward him cautiously, the soil shifting underfoot, and half slides into the hollow around the pine's roots. Emerging in arches from the ground, they look like a prison, the dead villager a convict leaning against bars.

Liska forces her eyes away from the gruesome scene to focus on the man's face and clothing. He is—*was*—of middling age, potbellied and tanned by sun. With sallow cheeks and a thick mustache, he looks like a hundred other village men. She does not recognize him, but she does know his clothing. His *strój* is not very different from those worn in Stodoła, differentiated by the smaller details, flourishes from a different region and seamstress. His white sheepskin coat is common for villages in the highlands, but what catches her eye is the looping embroidery around the pockets of his trousers; her uncle wore similar ones when Liska last saw him. Her stomach sinks.

"Do you know him?" the Leszy presses her. His voice is uncharacteristically quiet, almost gentle. Liska realizes her hands are shaking.

“I think he’s from Żabki. M-my aunt’s village.”

“Żabki... How far is that from the Driada’s border?”

“It’s... it’s about an hour’s cart ride, I think.” Her stomach tightens queasily. “Leszy, the people of that village have no reason to come this close to the Driada. Their pastures are far from here, and they do all their trade at the southern markets.”

“Yes,” the Leszy agrees, eyeing her expectantly. “So why is he here?”

He seems to be letting her come to her own conclusions, but Liska does not want to—the possibility makes her want to vomit. But paired with the sprawl of his limbs, the garish, predatory lacerations across his body...

“Something dragged him here, didn’t it?” she whispers. “All the way from Żabki. Why?”

“I don’t know,” he murmurs, contemplative, then frustrated. “I don’t know.”

The note of distress in his voice is no longer concealed—it creeps to the surface like a bruise, stains his expression even as a stag. His eyes shine with it, and he stomps an agitated hoof against the earth. Forgetting he is a demon and not an anxious animal, Liska puts a soothing hand on his shoulder.

The Leszy stiffens, then exhales shakily. “This will not do. I must find a way to strengthen my wards, to see more, to know more.”

Thousands of questions press themselves onto Liska’s tongue, about the wards, about the demons, about the attacks; first on the Leszy and now on this man. She files them away for later, for a calmer time when death does not stain the air.

Instead, she runs her fingers over the Leszy’s silken coat. “You care.” The realization slips out in a breath, a barely formed thought.

He laughs bitterly. “Yes, I care. Does that surprise you, fox? I, a cruel, monstrous demon, care about the human realm.”

She takes her hand off his shoulder, looking up at his face. “Why?”

“Because someone must.” His nostrils flare. “I was one of them once, long ago, and I created this wood to protect them. You may think me cruel, but I only do what I must to keep order in the Driada. Without me, your human lands would have been flooded by demons long ago.”

No wonder he doesn't look after himself or the manor, Liska thinks, if he pours all his efforts into guarding the Driada, mourning those he fails to protect. Like how a thorn, if not pulled out, will be swallowed up by the body and grow into it, the Leszy's sorrow has become embedded in him. Bringing it to the surface like this must be agony.

"It's not your fault, Leszy," she says softly. "No one can see everything."

A laugh, mirthless. "*I must. Only I can control the Driada. If I miss a single detail or let my guard down, this is what happens. The spirits find loopholes, cracks, and they get out.*" He looks away, his eyes dull. "*All of this is my doing. Therefore, all of it is my fault.*"

Liska wants to protest, but the desolation in his eyes and the stubborn edge to his voice tells her that it would only result in more self-deprecating responses. It's better not to push him. Instead, she leans over the corpse, holding her breath against the stench of offal to close the dead man's eyes.

In that moment, the corpse's hand shoots out and catches her by the wrist.

Liska yelps, pulling back, but the man—*corpse*—is faster. It leaps off the ground and tackles Liska, sending them both sliding down the soil. She manages to catch one of its wrists; its fingers have elongated and grown vicious talons, the veins on its forearm throbbing with black blood. The creature snarls, showering Liska with spittle and revealing two rows of teeth. With unnatural strength, it curls its claws around her shoulders and pushes her against the earth, teeth gnashing an inch from her jugular. Liska tries in vain to struggle from beneath its grip, but it is too strong, too strong....

Suddenly the weight vanishes. The creature is lifted into the air, and through tear-blurred vision Liska sees that branches have wrapped around its shoulders, legs, wrists, dragging it from the hollow onto the rise above. The Leszy stands there. His sword is clutched in one hand while the other is outstretched, encircled by branches sprouting from the trees behind him. Without missing a beat, he rams his sword through the creature's chest.

The monster releases a horrendous screech. It continues to thrash, its chest dripping black blood. The Leszy's expression remains unbothered, even when the creature's claws catch on his sleeve, sending pieces of torn fabric flying.

“How disrespectful,” he says. His branches release the creature, and it crashes to its knees. At the same time, the Leszy closes both hands around his sword and swings it in an arc.

The sword passes through the creature’s neck with a *crunch* of cleaved vertebrae. Before its severed head can hit the ground, the creature’s body dissolves, melting into a tar-black liquid that sizzles on the forest floor.

Just like that, it is over. The dead villager is gone.

Liska sits up against the roots, her entire body shaking with adrenaline. “W-what—”

The Leszy raises his sword to eye level, staring dispassionately at the black ooze still dripping off the blade. A flick of his fingers, a flash of green, and the sword is clean again. He sheathes it and leaps into the hollow landing gracefully beside Liska and kneeling at her side.

“Are you injured?”

“I don’t—I—” She gulps another too-shallow breath, brushing leaves and moss frantically off her skirt, then looks up at the demon.

That is a mistake.

The Leszy is far closer than she thought, his face inches from hers, sage-colored eyes like beacons in the dark. His brows are drawn low, his lips parted slightly, and the long shadows of his eyelashes paint his cheekbones like streaks of ink.

Their eyes meet, and it feels like the world tilts.

“Fox?” The Leszy’s frown deepens.

Liska jerks away, her tailbone striking a tree root painfully. “I’m fine,” she says, too quickly. Her cheeks are oddly hot, her heart beating in an entirely new sort of panic. “See?” She grips the roots behind her in an attempt to push herself upright, but her shaking legs quickly lose purchase on the blood-slicked soil.

The Leszy catches her before she can hit the ground, an exasperated look in his eyes. With all the ceremony of a farmer lifting a sack of potatoes, he scoops Liska into his arms and deposits her back on the flat soil above. He climbs after her, transforming into a stag as he goes.

Liska brushes the leaves from her skirt, reeling. “What—what *was* that?” she exclaims, finally recovered enough to form a proper sentence. “It was so fast, my

magic didn't even have time to react."

"A strzygoń," the Leszy says. "A newborn, not fully formed."

Liska shudders. She remembers the size of the gashes on the Leszy's back, far thicker than the claws this newborn had wielded. "Dear God," she whispers, looking back at the tree, trying not to imagine what an adult might have done to her.

In that moment, something catches her eye: a scrap of fabric where the corpse had been, buried in the dirt. Liska hesitates, then starts toward it.

"What are you doing, fox?" the Leszy calls, but she ignores him. Slipping over twigs and loosened soil, she picks up the object. It's a woolen hat, torn and spotted with blood. Liska's heart seizes—it feels unfair, somehow, for this to be all that is left of a man who once drew breath, who had a family and a home and a life.

"We should take this back to the village," she says.

"What good will that do?" the Leszy asks. "He's already dead."

"Surely there will be people looking for him." She tries not to think of Mama and how she must feel after Liska's disappearance. "Even if we can't help him anymore, we can give his family some semblance of closure."

For an instant, it seems like the Leszy will respond with another of his scathing rebuttals. Instead, he inclines his head. "Very well, then. But we do it without being seen."

The Leszy allows Liska to clamber once more onto his back and sets off at a trot. The night is silent and grieving as they journey from the Driada to the border, then onto wildflower-blanketed highlands. It takes no more than an hour, yet it feels like eternity, the silence between them heavy enough to fill two. When the glittering lake and the candlelit windows of Żabki finally come into view, the Leszy stumbles.

"What's wrong?" Liska asks worriedly.

"We're too far from the Driada," he says tightly. "My power is tied to the wood—the farther I get, the more I weaken."

Before Liska can say anything, an abrupt shout carries along the hills, quickly followed by another. More voices join in, calling the same name over and over.

“A search party,” Liska says in realization. “We can leave it here. Hopefully they will find it soon.”

The Leszy kneels so that Liska can slide off and lay the hat in the grass. She says a quick prayer for the man’s soul, then climbs onto the Leszy’s back and rests her head against his neck.

The return gallop is a haze, the night blurring into naught but ink and moonlight. Exhaustion rolls over Liska to the monotone *one-two-three, one-two-three* of the Leszy’s hooves. Their travel is slower this time, the Leszy’s breaths heavy, and the steady rocking of his movements is enough to coax Liska’s eyelids shut. She fights it, but sadness and slumber are both overpowering forces.



Liska wakes in her own bed to the murky light of a woodland dawn. She is still in her travel clothes, minus the cloak, and her legs are stiff and achy from clinging to the Leszy’s back. A moment passes before it occurs to her that she has no memory of arriving at the manor or walking to her room, which can only mean one thing. The Leszy *carried* her. To *bed*.

“Oh God.” Liska ducks her head into her hands, curls falling over her face as she stewes in mortification. “Oh God, *why?*”

And of course, *of course*, today is the one day the Leszy is not being misanthropic. She finds the demon in the kitchen stirring a pot over the stove, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to the elbows. He darts a look of surprise as she comes in, his eyebrows curling up in an almost-guilty expression, as if she caught him doing something felonious.

“Oh. I thought you would sleep longer.”

Liska rubs the back of her neck. “Yes, well...” She is suddenly very conscious of her messy, undone curls and sweeps them back hastily. “I... you... ah,” she says stupidly.

“Yes,” he replies, also stupidly.

“Thank you.”

“Mm.”

He returns to his work by the stove. Liska finishes tying her hair and settles into a chair by the kitchen table, tracing a notch in the wood absently. Her mind

is still a jumble from the previous night, the strzygoń's twisted face a stain she cannot get out of her thoughts. When the Leszy slides a steaming bowl and a spoon in front of her, she startles. He gives her a questioning look, and she waves her hand in response. "It's nothing. And um, thank you. Again."

She eyes the contents of the bowl. It's a simple porridge, fragrant with apple and cinnamon, and she is far too ravenous to even question the demon's cooking. She gulps down several spoonfuls—it's surprisingly decent, if a little sweet—before glancing at the Leszy.

"About last night—"

He looks away. "It happened; it's over."

Liska frowns. How can he be so quick to move on? Frustration unfurls within her, potent and blistering. "But it's not over! That is the second time this month the spirits have broken through your wards."

"I'm aware, thank you."

She winces. "No. No, what I mean is... doesn't it worry you? I don't know much beyond my own village, but Stodoła has not seen a demon outside the wood in at least two generations. I know you care. I saw it yesterday. You know something is wrong."

The Leszy hesitates. "Yes," he admits. "Something is wrong. *You*."

Her blood goes cold. "What?"

"Let me tell you a story," he says, "about a village girl who ran through the demon-wood on the night of midsummer, treading in places no human should step and finding things no human should see. The demons have been restless ever since your arrival, not-so-clever fox. You threw the Driada out of balance, made my wards weaken, and woke demons that have slumbered for a long time."

Liska sinks into the chair, feeling the weight of his words like a physical thing. Of course this would be her doing. Of *course*. It seems she is fated to never do good, no matter how she tries.

"Fox," the Leszy says abruptly. He is looking at her with the slightest of frowns, like he is trying to read someone's messy handwriting. "Enough of that. I am the warden of the Driada, and you would never have entered that night if I had not wanted it. I could have just as easily transformed into something horrifying and chased you out. At least then I would have enjoyed it."

The last bit is teasing, inviting Liska to reciprocate, but her mind is elsewhere. It is with the dead villager, with the flash of the Leszy's sword and the bloodied hat left on a wildflower field. It is with Florian, with the words *His blood is on my hands*.

She takes a breath. Will she truly give a demon what he wants? Will she risk it, after all she has learned? She must. Mama is more important. Stodoła is more important. And they are all in danger because she upset the spirit-wood.

She forces herself to look up, to grab the Leszy's gaze and hold it steadily. "You wanted me to serve at your side?" she says. "Very well, then. Teach me."

"Your magic..."

"You said you would find a way to free it. Do it, and I will help you set things right."

His lips twitch up slightly—she cannot tell if he is relieved or satisfied. "So be it. I will continue my research, and with your cooperation I'm sure I can find a solution in short order. In the meantime, there are other ways I can train you, but they will be somewhat less... pleasant."

"Less pleasant?" She throws him a glare. "Have you ever said a sentence that isn't simultaneously cryptic and threatening?"

He smirks, and his teeth glint white in the morning light. "Meet me by the well in half an hour."

RETURN OF THE RED- EYED HOUND

LISKA IS STANDING BY THE stone well when the Leszy throws a knife at her.

“Catch,” he calls.

Liska dodges. The knife falls to the ground at her feet, and she fumbles after it, plucking it out of a mess of bristly grass. She is about to chide the demon, but her words die off as she turns the dagger over. The sun-dapples piercing the canopy skip over its blade, illuminating the curling florals engraved into the metal. Inadvertently, her breath hitches. “It’s *beautiful*.”

“A clever weapon for a not-so-clever fox,” the Leszy comments. With his sleeves rolled up to show vein-traced forearms and his overlong hair tied back, he is all lean prowess and formidable poise.

Liska turns her gaze quickly back to the dagger, wrapping her fingers tentatively around the grip. It is mother-of-pearl, done in the likeness of a doe with glittering turquoise eyes. It fits in her hand surprisingly well, substantial but not overly heavy.

“Where did you get such a thing?”

“It was gifted to me by King Bolesław the Strong after the battle beneath Różana Góra,” the Leszy replies smoothly.

Liska’s jaw falls open. “What?!” So casual, as if everyone has met a king from four hundred years ago at one of the most famous battles of Orlica’s history. “You were there?!”

“Many czarownik were.”

“But... but I thought you said you couldn’t leave the Driada.”

“Not exactly. It’s not pleasant, certainly, and my power dwindles the longer I am away. Still, being a demon has given me certain advantages... including magic powerful enough to turn the tides of a war.” He extends his fingers, and a small branch grows out of his sleeve, coiling around his arm.

Liska’s heart skips. She imagines a battlefield where charging knights fight not against each other, but against great thrashing branches. The Leszy charges through the fray, longsword flashing, surrounded by other frightening men with wicked grins and glowing hands.

“What happened to them?” she asks. “The other czarownik?”

The branch around the Leszy’s wrist curls up from his palm, as if scenting the air. “Most of my—*our*—kindred died fighting in wars, the rest fighting each other. Their relentless ambition and petty quarrels gave them a rather... poor reputation. Magic duels were frequent, and the common people were often caught in between.”

“So magic *is* dangerous,” Liska says. “The Church is right.”

“No,” he says sharply. “The Church is *clever*. At the time, a power struggle was taking place. The czarownik advised king and council, but the Church had the ear of the people. They saw an opportunity and used the people’s fear, sermonizing on the evils of magic, calling it immoral and unnatural. Eventually, the last of us were driven from our homes or forced to conceal our identities.”

Liska longs to ask more, but he puts up a hand before she has the chance. “I believe I have indulged your prying long enough. You think I will let you stall until evening? A strzygoń nearly tore your throat out last night, and I would prefer not to have to rescue you again.”

He begins to pace, his slow, taunting steps reminding Liska of their first meeting by the fern flower. “Demons are harder to kill than humans,” he begins. “While humans are flesh and blood and sinew, demons are of the in-between, neither living nor dead, so they obey a different set of rules. Those rules are determined by the traumatic events that led to their deaths and caused a piece of their soul to remain on earth.”

Liska is surprised to find she understands. It is not so different from village superstition: *kikimora* are the souls of infants who died unbaptized, *strzygoń* are demons seeking vengeance, and *rusalka* are the souls of women drowned. Even *skrzaty* are said to be lingering souls, usually of a home's previous tenant.

"So what are the rules?" Liska asks nervously. "How do you kill something that has already died?"

He points to the dagger in her hand. "I did not give you that because I was in a gift-giving mood. It was made by a *czarownik* blacksmith, and there are spells hammered into the blade. That is the only thing that can kill a demon—anything else will simply inconvenience them."

Liska clutches the doe-hilted dagger tighter, knuckles white.

"And try not to look like you intend to run screaming." The *Leszy* crosses his arms. "With the face you're making right now, your enemies might die of laughter."

Huffing, Liska tries to school her expression into something resembling bravery. Judging by the *Leszy*'s soft chuckle, she fails spectacularly.

"Now," he continues, "if you know the type of spirit you are dealing with and how it is created, then you can deduce its undoing. *Rusalka*, for one, cannot be killed in the body of water they haunt—they must be lured away. A *strzygoń*, as you saw, must have its spine severed, ideally by cutting off the head. They are our most numerous enemies in the *Driada*, so that is where you will start."

The *Leszy* beckons her forward, uncrossing his arms and widening his stance. "They are fast. The one you saw was a newborn—imagine how much faster an experienced one is. Their weakness, and our advantage, lies in their thin, fragile bones. The most important thing is to keep out of reach of their claws and to get under their guard. Daggers like yours are better for thrusting than cutting, so you must aim for the base of the skull, here, and the cervical spine."

His movement is sudden, an eagle's dive or a wolf's pounce. She doesn't even have the chance to blink before his one hand is curled around her throat, the other at a hairsbreadth from her chest.

"Dead."

Liska sucks in a quivering breath, lowering the hands she'd thrown up instinctively.

“And so the not-so-clever fox becomes an even-less-clever rabbit. You are fortunate I am not your enemy.” He points at her feet. “Spread these apart, one in front of the other. Good. Keep them like that—the closer they come together, the easier it is for me to knock you over. Loosen up, move fast and light. Speed could save your life.” He taps a finger against the edge of her dagger. Green sparks flash, and the metal seems to melt and harden again, edges going blunt. “I doubt you can harm me,” he says mildly, “but at this rate, you may impale yourself.”

For the next half hour, they practice like that, the Leszy rushing at Liska from all angles while she does nothing but skitter away, learning to keep out of reach of his hands. Once he is satisfied, he shows her how to block a strike: which part of the arm to use, how to twist her enemies’ arm behind them or open up their guard to slash the throat. Liska is not very good at it—she flinches every time the Leszy moves, stumbles over garden detritus, and hesitates before she strikes. Eventually, she puts her hands up in surrender.

“I can’t do this, Leszy. It’s hopeless.”

“I am a seven-hundred-year old demon,” the Leszy says, pushing back loose strands of sweat-damp hair. “Only a fool would think they could match me. Frankly, you are surprisingly competent.”

Liska does not respond, his final words of praise sinking and dying somewhere within her. She slumps down on the ground, leaning her arms on her knees, and catches her breath as the wet soil soaks her skirts.

When she looks back at the Leszy, he is busy unraveling the leather strip that had been holding back his hair, his brows drawn in focus. The damp fabric of his shirt sticks to his body, lean, graceful muscle outlined beneath. He raises his arms higher, and the shirt’s hem untucks from his waistband, revealing pale skin and the hard lines of his abdomen.

Something in Liska’s lower stomach twinges. She realizes, too late, that he is speaking to her, and that she has been staring without saying a word.

“What?” she says dumbly.

He gives her a puzzled look. “I said we’re done for today.” When she does not move, he takes her dagger from her limp hand and taps it. The edges gleam sharply as he hands it back. “Try to resist the urge to stab me in my sleep,” he

adds. Then he picks up his sukmana, which he'd tossed by the side of the well, and slings it over his back like a cape. "Meet me here again tomorrow. Same time."

"Wait!" Liska exclaims. Frustration sparks within her—at the Leszy's sudden dismissal, at her own foolish attraction. "Stay with me."

He halts in his steps. "What?"

"Stay," she repeats. "You always leave like this, as if you're afraid I may burn you if you're with me too long."

He stiffens. She wonders if she is close to the truth, but she cannot tell—she never can, with him. It is only his evergreen eyes that flicker strangely, like the shadow of an animal weaving through a grove.

"I'm sorry," he says at last, hard-edged, and turns away.

Liska does not see him again that day.



At dusk, the Driada turns violescent, hues of lavender and plum saturating the trees. From the dimming sky, moonlight seeps in through the windows, shadows spilling like ink across the halls. As Liska retreats to her chambers, she is greeted by a peculiar sight—in front of the stairwell, a slender tree has grown, holding a book in the tangle of its leafy branches.

The tree sways as Liska approaches. By now she recognizes the workings of the Leszy's magic: the scent of sparks and pine, the winking of emerald light along the paper-thin leaves. Carefully, she slips the book out of the branches. She recognizes it: it's the book with the rejuvenation spell, the one the Leszy had asked her to read from. *Czarologia*, the cover reads in worn gold embossing. *A Study of the Arcane*.

A book on magic. A part of her wants to throw it into the hearth—another wants to open it and devour every single word. She settles on neither, tucking the heavy tome under her arm and heading for her room.

Jaga appears on the stairwell banister, balancing on it to keep pace with Liska. *First you agree to help that horned menace, and now you accept his gifts*, she grumbles. *What happened to caution?*

Liska hoists the book up higher, her arms still aching from sparring. “Just because I want to help him doesn’t mean I trust him. I know what he is.”

What of your magic? I thought you wanted to get rid of it.

“I do,” Liska says. “But I made a mistake, Jaga. I upset the balance in the Driada, and now the demons are agitated. They keep escaping, and even the Leszy can’t seem to manage them all. If I can use my magic, I can help him set this right.”

Jaga jumps to the floor and follows Liska down the hallway. *And afterward?*

“My wish is still the same,” she says without hesitation. “When all this is over, I’m going to leave magic behind, and I will go home. But for now I need to make sure I still *have* a home to return to.”

Jaga yawns, showing more molars than any cat should have. *Do as you will. I am merely a house-spirit; I do not understand all this scheming and planning. But I would prefer you refrain from getting killed—I do not want to starve.*

Liska smiles, turning the doorhandle. “I will try. Good night, Jaga.”

Jaga, the skrzat repeats, blinking fondly. *It is nice to have a name.* With a flick of her tail, she pads off down the hall, leaving Liska feeling warm and slightly perplexed by their exchange.

Liska’s bedroom is dim as she enters, the candelabra brightening briefly in greeting, then settling back to a low, comfortable glow. Liska places the *Czarologia* on the bedstand and turns to pick up her nightgown, which she has left folded under her pillows.

That is when she realizes she is not alone.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Liska’s hair stands on end. Clutching the nightgown to her chest, she turns shakily toward the sound, praying it is only her imagination.

But no. Red eyes glow in the shadowed corner where candlelight does not reach. Two *familiar* eyes. Step by prowling step, the ghost hound emerges from the dark, drawing his lips back in a wicked grin. His nails click on the hardwood; his breath smells of decay. Up close, Liska realizes just how massive he is, his emaciated corpse of a body reaching nearly to her chest. Saliva leaks from his torn lips, gleams between his teeth, and falls in heavy beads like blood.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

He is so close, so close. One more step, and he could rip Liska to shreds.

“But you won’t, will you?”

She says it with realization. How else would the hound get in? The Leszy had promised to strengthen his wards, yet she saw the hound again afterward, the night the Leszy was injured. And here the creature is once more, weeks later, a nightmarish emissary. Almost as if... as if the manor is *letting* him in.

Get out get out get out. Get out before he wakes.

“I cannot,” Liska tells him. “I must do this, don’t you see? I cannot go home until my magic is gone.”

The hound’s eyes glow like harvest moons. There is intelligence behind them, an unearthly understanding, and it wavers upon hearing her words. The hound’s hackles rise, and he snarls, wordless and almost... almost frustrated. Still growling, he whirls on his haunches and leaps at the window. Liska braces for the glass to shatter on impact, but the hound merely melts into the shadows and reappears beyond, in the garden. He stalks toward the well, to the same spot Liska saw him upon their second encounter. There he raises a paw and strikes at the ground. When he looks back at Liska, he seems almost expectant.

“I understand,” Liska whispers.

She does not know if the hound hears her words, but he vanishes the moment they leave her lips.

A GRAVE IN THE GARDEN

LISKA RISES WITH THE SUN and goes looking for a shovel. She finds one in the storage closet, half rusted with age and chipped in several places. It works well enough against the springy soil of the garden, though the wooden handle threatens her with splinters as she begins to dig.

Dig, at the spot the red-eyed hound showed her last night.

It is some time before the shovel hits something brittle with a dull *thunk*. Liska freezes; though she expected this, a shudder still courses through her. She steels herself before kneeling in the dew-spotted grass, gulping deep breaths of cold air to keep away her unease. Slowly she sweeps away handfuls of fragrant earth until she finds it.

The white gleam of bone.

Liska takes a steadying breath, stomach churning in anticipation. Another handful of soil, and she can make out the shape of a skull. A few more, and she is able to pull it free from the soil, accompanied by a cascade of pebbles and a wriggling earthworm. She pries the worm free before pulling the skull onto her lap, smudging dirt across her apron. One of the teeth comes loose, and she puts it back in place, its brittle surface scraping her fingers.

It looks like a wolf's skull, but Liska knows it isn't. The nasal bone is too long, the frontal bone too slender, and those crowded, yellowed teeth are oh so dreadfully familiar.

It is the skull of the red-eyed ghost hound.

In Liska's hands, the skull feels almost like it is vibrating. She cannot stop looking into its grimy eye sockets, as if she will find a message within. There are more bones buried alongside it—the rest of the hound's remains—but she leaves them be. They do not call to her like the skull does.

She sets her grisly discovery aside and begins to sweep dirt back into the hole, dawn mist billowing around her like a burial shroud. The trees are dark, and beyond them the sky's rosy skin is ripped apart by clouds, bleeding sunlight in golden streams. It is time, Liska decides. Time to confront the Leszy.

She doesn't get the chance. She is halfway down the path when they find each other, demon and girl, eyes meeting from across the garden. The iron gate shrieks as he pushes it open, clattering once before it clicks shut behind him. His sword is at his side, his leather boots caked in mud. When he notices the skull in Liska's hands, he shows no reaction at all. With leisurely strides he crosses the flagstone path, a swirl of magic dancing across his clothes and vanishing away any forest filth before he reaches Liska.

"Will I ever find you doing something that is not absolutely incomprehensible?" the Leszy asks.

Liska stares, grappling with words. She spent all night mulling over the hound's message, worrying about what she might find and what to do then. Now that the moment has come, she feels small somehow, like a thief caught in the act.

"Is it incomprehensible?" she asks finally. Her voice floats listlessly through the foggy air. "You told me you didn't have a hound."

He puts a hand on the pommel of his longsword, and Liska's heartbeat speeds up, dread curdling in her stomach. "I didn't," he says.

"Then where did this come from?"

He lifts a shoulder in a half shrug. "This is a spirit-wood, not-so-clever fox. There is more than one corpse buried beneath these trees."

"But not all of them have decided to haunt me," Liska says. "Leszy, please. I know there is something you're not telling me. The hound appeared in my room last night. It *showed* me where to dig."

"And you *trusted* it?"

"More than I trust you!"

Something shifts in the demon. He turns away, trying to conceal it, but Liska sees the pained expression that flashes across his face, the resentment that follows. Still, she cannot stop. She is tired of secrets, tired of being afraid, and more than anything, tired of feeling like an outsider.

“I opened the library door.” The words tumble out in a rush, leaving her breathless. “I found a piece of Florian’s letter. I know he died because of you.”

His gasp is not audible, but she sees the tremor of his chest as she utters the words. “Damn manor,” he says. “Damn girl. Intrepid thing you are, eager to be swallowed by a beast just to examine its innards.” He laughs, in the merciless way that ice cracks underfoot on a frozen lake. “It seems I named you poorly. Clever, clever fox, with your inexplicable charms. You are my penance, aren’t you?” He rounds on Liska, seeming to grow four sizes in his wrath. Before she can even flinch, he snatches the hound’s skull from her hands.

“All for a little *sentiment*. Well, lesson learned.”

He shoulders past her, heading for the grave, the overturned soil barely hidden despite Liska’s efforts. He holds the skull over it, fog eddying around him.

“Leszy, wait!” Liska starts after him. “What are you doing?!”

“Something I should have done long ago.”

Suddenly there is magic dancing the length of his extended arm, curling off his fingertips and diving between the skull’s jaws. He glances over his shoulder at Liska, who can do nothing but watch, her pulse racing.

“Let this be a lesson,” he says coldly. “Every spirit is anchored to something. Skrzaty to houses, rusalki to rivers, humans to human bodies. Destroy that anchor, banish the spirit.” He looks back at the grave, uttering a word in godspeech.

The skull bursts into flames.

It goes up like a struck match, the flames emerald in color, the heat so strong that Liska feels it from where she stands. The stench of melting bone and scorched soil rise up like a miasma. Among it all, the Leszy stands statuesque, green fire reflected in his eyes.

“Why?” Liska cries hoarsely, eyes stinging. “He wasn’t going to hurt me. He only wanted me to find his skull.”

“You don’t know that. Spirits are unpredictable. They turn wicked on a dime, keep vendettas you cannot imagine. This one kept breaking through my wards because the manor still considers him an ally. There is no telling what he was planning.”

“Why didn’t you burn his body before, then?”

When he looks at her, she cannot see his eyes—he is nothing but a dark silhouette against raging flames.

“Leszy, please,” she begs. “I just want to understand. I’m tired of being afraid.”

“It will only make you more afraid if you know.”

“Tell me anyway,” she says, voice weakened by the smoke. “Tell me why your past keeps haunting me. Tell me why my sleep is filled with nightmares. I can’t let this go otherwise. I *can’t*.”

He looks away with a growl. His shoulders rise, then fall again—a concession, or perhaps a surrender. “That wolfhound’s name was Mrok.” Beyond the hissing of flames, the demon’s voice is bleak. “He belonged to my apprentice, who lived two hundred years ago. To Florian.”

Liska’s eyes widen. “Your apprentice. But if he was... why did he die? What happened that night?”

“We argued,” the Leszy says, “Florian and I. He seemed fine afterward, but I suppose he was simply hiding his decision from me: that he was going to leave. He wrote me that letter and left while I slept, taking Mrok with him. He was powerful in magic; he knew how to navigate the Driada. But sometimes the wood is faster. That night the spirits were restless, the Driada wide awake. Something took him.”

Liska’s eyes are wide. “What do you mean, something *took* him?”

“He fell prey to the wood. I only know because Mrok returned, barely alive, his body shredded by injuries. I tried to heal him, but...” The Leszy’s voice breaks unexpectedly. He covers his face with one hand, fighting to compose himself. “I made a mistake with Florian. I let my guard down, and he paid the price. That fool always had to do things on his own terms.”

There is something in his voice, careful and pliant, like clay being softened by warm hands. Liska remembers the letter, the words *my love* written with such

care.

“Did you love him?” she asks cautiously.

“Yes.” He spits the word out with an edge of distaste, as though it is a bitter thing. “If anything a demon feels can be called *love*.”

He falls silent, watching the flames devour the last of their kindling and begin to dwindle. When there is nothing left but a pit of ash, he steps back stiffly, turning from Liska.

“The only body I had to bury was that hound’s—that’s why I kept it. The wood left me nothing more, so, foolishly, I tried to hold on to the last thing I had.”

“Leszy.” Liska tries to put a hand on his arm, but he slaps it away.

“I don’t need your pity.” He whirls, his sukmana flaring behind him. “I hope you’re satisfied now, not-so-clever fox.”

The fog seems to thicken. It swallows the Leszy up as he leaves Liska behind, a scattering of ashes trailing in his wake. The slam of the garden gate shutting behind him is like an earthquake through the manor’s fundamentals spooking a raven from the rowan tree. Silence follows, broken only by the raven’s distant cawing.

Liska sinks to her heels, ducking her head between her arms and biting back a sob. She watches a single tear fall, gleaming, toward the ground. But when it lands, it does not meet earth—it plops against the ivory surface of a canine tooth, half hidden in the grass.

Liska straightens. It’s the hound’s—Mrok’s—tooth. It must have fallen free when the Leszy grabbed the skull from her hands. She picks it up, holding it gingerly in her palm. After a moment’s consideration, she tucks it into the pocket of her apron.

As she does, Mrok’s warning returns to her. *Get out get out get out. Get out before he wakes.*

The Leszy’s story refuses to fill in all the gaps. It feels like a portrait with the face unpainted, lacking in detail that could change its identity. She cannot forget the urgency she felt from the manor that night in the library. It had felt distinctly like a warning, like she was in danger.

But it does not seem like the Leszy was lying, either. His anger, his anguish, it was *raw*, like the cherry-red blood that pours out after debriding a wound. Liska knows that pain intimately, knows it cannot be faked. And after seeing him burning with it, she has been reminded that it lives inside her too: a pile of embers that still blisters her occasionally, refusing to go out no matter how much she tries to bury it.

They are not similar at all, Liska and the Leszy, but they share two things: magic and grief.

Liska swallows back another sob, another round of tears. For a moment she wishes things were different. She wishes she could trust the Leszy, that she could comfort him, that she could feel like she belongs in his world of magic and sentient manors and everlasting woodlands. But he is a demon, and she wears a fetter, and Mrok's tooth lies heavy in her pocket, reminding her that there are still things left unsolved.

Tick, tick goes the clock of peculiarities. It is time for the next mystery.

DEMON, DISARMED

THE DAY PASSES, CHEWED UP and spat out by the next grim dawn. The Leszy does not return, and Liska finds her concern growing despite their tempestuous parting.

She hides Mrok’s tooth in an empty bronze vase in the parlor—it makes her nervous, and she isn’t sure if having it around her is the best idea—then fills the vase with baby’s breath that she has hung and dried.

That done, she steps from foot to foot, restless. Her worry is its own ghost, haunting her through the night. Not even cooking, her usual escape, has helped, though the fragrance of stewing bigos—wild mushrooms and meats and hearty cabbage—now wafts through the halls.

All she has left is the book the Leszy gave her, its faded cover seeming to taunt her from where it lies on a settee. In Stodoła, children pretending to do magic were quickly reprimanded. *Magic is a sin*, they were told. *Even pretending can draw the attention of wicked spirits*. Liska heard it enough times from her mother, from Father Paweł’s sermons, even parroted by her peers. It remains to this day always in the back of her mind, but after so many days in the Driada it has become muted.

She runs her hands over the cover, the worn leather cool and wrinkled to the touch.

Czarologia: A Study of the Arcane.

“It’s just a book,” she reasons, turning the jaundiced pages with nervous hands, taking in the tight, neat script. She curls up against the silk of the settee,

embroidery snagging on her blouse as she props the book against her knees. A paragraph catches her eye—

Magic, at its fundamental level, is a heightening of the senses. People born with magic are capable of seeing things others cannot, so they can manipulate things others cannot. What they are sensing is the międzyświat, the in-between.

“The in-between,” Liska echoes. “Jaga, you’ve used that word before. What is it, exactly?”

Jaga blinks open one eye from where she is curled on the armrest, purring gently. *It is the realm of spirits, the place between death and life. I am a part of it—that is why I can do magic that is considered impossible even for a czarownik. You would be shocked at what you can do when you are not bound to the laws of the corporeal world.*

“I think I used to feel it, Jaga, this... this in-between. I could sense... possibilities around me. I knew that if I willed it, I could make flame or frost appear. If I touched an animal, I could delve deep enough to read its thoughts.”

Do you miss it?

Liska pretends to be too engrossed in the book to answer. She does not want to admit the frightening truth: that sometimes she does miss it, and sometimes she fears what will become of her once it is gone for good.

She doesn’t get far into her reading before she hears the click of the manor’s door unlocking, then the thud of it shutting. When the Leszy’s footsteps follow, emotions flood through Liska—first relief, then dread, then something simmering, not quite as potent as anger. Among it all is an instinct she can never suppress, one that comes from being a healer used to tending lesser creatures.

I should check on him, she thinks, getting to her feet, *if only to make sure he hasn’t gotten himself injured again.*

She finds the Leszy in the foyer, setting aside an ornate chest painted with religious symbols. She must have entered quietly, and he must be thoroughly distracted, because he startles when he notices her standing there.

“Fox,” he says steadily.

“Demon,” she replies, uneasy.

They both fall silent, the air between them charged and crackling. A brewing storm—Liska half expects to hear the boom of thunder.

“What’s...” She tries to dispel the tension. “What’s in the chest?”

“Tithe,” he says dully. “Some sort of exotic wine from the south. From a wealthy Litvenian woman traveling to Orlica.”

“What for?”

He shrugs off his sukmana. “What reasons are there? Politics, marriage, or both. And their lovely gift shall be yet another token to clutter my storerooms.”

Liska gawks at him. “If you don’t want it, why ask for it?”

“I don’t.” He emphasizes the words by shaking stray droplets off his sukmana. It must have rained wherever he was, because the sky is clear over the manor.

“But the stories—”

“Say that I am a wrinkly old dziadek with a beard made of tree leaves.” He squints. “You still think I expect a tithe? Don’t be absurd. What use have I for wealth when I can create what I wish for from the ground beneath my feet?”

He turns to hang up his sukmana, his unbound hair falling across his face. Liska rubs at her arms, that strange tension prickling at her skin like static.

“Leszy?” she tries softly. “I’m sorry about yesterday. And about Florian.”

He lowers his hands and looks away, jaw working. Candlelight reflects on his antlers, catching on their notched surface.

“I kept so much from you,” he says slowly, “because I did not want you to be afraid. That, and...” He trails off. “It’s not easy.”

She tugs on a braid. “I know,” she says, trying not to remember the terrible things she has done to keep her own secrets hidden.

Quiet falls between them. One of the Leszy’s sentinel-moths flutters across the room, settling on Liska’s shoulder and opening its wings to rest. She holds her hand out to it, glad for the distraction.

“Hello there,” she croons, casting a hesitant glance at the Leszy. He is busy inspecting his sword, so she coaxes it onto her finger. “How are you?”

“Slacking off,” the Leszy grunts. “He has work to do.”

“He?”

“Mariusz.”

“You *named* him?”

“I named them all. They’re not exactly sentient, but they do act on their own, so I needed a way to—oh, stop looking at me like that. You’re the one who named the skrzat after a heart-eating witch.”

Liska can’t help but smile, and the Leszy reciprocates with something that is halfway to one, hesitant and entirely unexpected. Like parting clouds, the air loosens up, and she begins to breathe easier.

“I underestimated you,” the Leszy remarks. “When I met you on Kupala Night. I expected you to be a harmless thing, staying away and doing as you were told. Imagine my surprise when you led my manor and my house-spirit into what I can only call a mutiny.”

“I didn’t mean to—” Liska starts, but he shakes his head.

“I’m complimenting you. I chose the field of battle, and you disarmed me nonetheless. You do that frequently, I find. It’s actually quite annoying.”

A sudden frustration boils up in Liska. “You *trapped me* in your *sentient manor*, and you find me *annoying*?”

“It was for your safety,” he says calmly. “And not just yours. I couldn’t take you back to Orlica only for you to tell everyone what you found here, could I? Your kind would love to come after a wood-demon with pitchforks, and that would end horribly for both parties, I assure you. Besides, not-so-clever fox, you *did* make a bargain.”

“You forced me into it! That’s hardly a binding contract.”

“It was your choice.”

“You said the demons would eat me,” she says flatly.

“You made it to the manor—you really think you couldn’t have made it back to the border?”

“Could I have?”

He steps closer, eyes glinting devilishly. “We will never know, will we?”

She fights the urge to slap him. “You’re terrible!”

“I won’t deny it.” The corner of his mouth tilts up. “And I don’t think you hate it.”

“You have a very high opinion of yourself for someone with a pet moth named *Mariusz*.”

The Leszy raises an eyebrow. Liska crosses her arms.

“Disarming,” he says with mild fascination. “If only I could look into that head of yours and—” He cuts off, and his eyes brighten suddenly.

“What is it?” Liska asks.

He whirls away, heading for the stairs. “I know how to fix your magic.”



When Liska catches up to the Leszy, he is already in his study, scribbling furious notes in a worn book. Golden hour has struck, the sun beaming through the rowan tree’s branches and reflecting off the Leszy’s many bronze instruments. Liska perches on a stack of books and waits until the Leszy notices her. Finally, he turns, the old notebook splayed open in his hands.

“In the past, you see, if a czarownik was found guilty of using their magic for evil, their magic would be taken away as punishment.” He gives her a wry look. “This may shock you, but we were not the immoral conjurers the Church likes to make us out to be.”

Liska says nothing. Her own perception of magic tilts like a scale every day—one moment she is fascinated by it, and the next she is shrinking away, remembering all she was taught as a child. “I thought you couldn’t take another’s magic for yourself.”

“You can’t,” he agrees. “But you can seal it off if you are more powerful than them. It’s like putting something on a shelf out of reach. The person the spell was performed on could not access their magic unless their punishment was lifted by the spell’s caster.”

“You think someone sealed off my magic?” Liska asks. “I think I would know if that happened.”

“Not quite.” He stops in front of her, pensive. “I think *you* did. I’ve suspected it from the start, but everything I’ve seen only confirms my theory. Either by using it too much or not using it enough, something you did threw it out of balance. As a defense mechanism, your mind locked it away. You might not even know the exact moment it happened—it could have been gradual, or...”

For a moment, his voice fades out, replaced by a crowd of memories clamoring for attention. Liska feels herself stiffen beneath the onslaught, fighting not to see what lies within. From the Leszy’s words, she knows the exact

moment her magic shattered, and if the Leszy asks her to reveal that, she doesn't

—

“Fox?” The Leszy’s hand is on her shoulder—she doesn’t remember feeling it land. “You look pale. This can wait until tomorrow if it must.”

“No.” She shakes her head sharply. “The longer we wait, the more chances there are for demons to get out.” He has already almost died once, and so has she. “What’s your solution?”

“Well.” He sets aside his notebook, patting its constellation-stamped cover. “The problem with this affliction of yours is that because it wasn’t caused by a spell, there is no counter-spell. I’ve been going through old texts looking for similar cases, but it appears your situation is... unique.”

Fidgeting nervously, Liska sinks deeper onto the stack of books, only for it to teeter and nearly fall. She gets to her feet, knees weak. “So what do you propose?”

“This.” He produces a piece of white chalk seemingly out of nowhere and begins to draw a wide circle on the floorboards. “It’s a soul-reading spell. It’s a paltry thing, really; you’ve used it unwittingly when you’ve spoken to animals. It can only read surface-level emotions, but it occurred to me just now that I could modify it and... go deeper.” He finishes the circle and begins drawing lines leading to the center. “I will not lie to you; this is purely theoretical, so you will have to trust me. But if I’m right—and I’m usually right—I should be able to reach into your soul.”

“You’re going to... reach into my... soul,” she repeats. “And what is that supposed to accomplish?”

“Magic is part of the soul, and the soul is part of magic,” he says patiently, scribbling illegible words at the circle’s edges. “That is where I will search. Think of this as... diving into a lake to retrieve a sunken object. As long as you remain open to me, I can come back up to the surface.”

“And if something goes wrong?”

He straightens, setting aside the chalk. “Best-case scenario, I am forced back into my body. Worst-case scenario, our magic—our souls—could end up entangled, and undoing that is a whole catastrophe I would rather avoid.”

She gulps. “I see what you mean. And how do I... remain... *open*?”

“Be calm. Do not fight me... for once.” He guides Liska to stand in the middle, where the lines intersect. “Dealing with human souls is complex,” he says, seeing her look of confusion. “These are just additional tools to guide my spell.” He flexes his fingers, and green magic begins to flicker between them, swirling in graceful loops up his arm. “I will have to touch you. If you don’t want to proceed, tell me now.”

Liska knows she should shout *no*, should run from the room as fast as her legs can carry her. It is what the Liska from before would have done. But the Liska now... she will do what she must to set things right.

Even if it means trusting—only for now, only this once—a demon.

“It’s all right,” she says, voice feeble but chin raised high. “I can do it.”

The Leszy gives her a slight, barely there smile, lit by the glow of his magic. “Don’t you worry, not-so-clever fox,” he says. “I can be gentle if I try.”

Without further preamble, he takes her face in his hands.



MEMORIES

LISKA TENSES INSTINCTIVELY, PROMPTING A low “Relax,” from the Leszy. She can feel his magic more than see it, a tingling sensation that spreads from his fingertips and crawls over her skin like ivy up a trellis. Liska tries to ease into it, but the unnatural, pale color of his hands is a constant reminder of who he is: demon, demon, demon.

The Leszy begins to whisper the spell, the deep musicality of godspeech echoing long after it has left his lips. It weaves a tapestry of his magic, a web expanding across her skin, growing in force. She can almost smell it—the ozone of a storm in a forest, the air crackling around her. She nearly expects to hear the distant creak of trees as the feeling intensifies, diving deeper, deeper, consuming her whole.

Her body disappears, leaving her weightless, abstract. Around her flow ribbons of the cosmos, deep violet and midnight blue and studded with memories bright as stars. Tata’s deep laugh, Mama bundling up herbs to dry, Marysieńka giggling as Liska helps her clamber onto Stara’s back. Tomasz’s cruel smile as he says *lichó*, Tomasz holding Marysieńka’s hand, Marysieńka staring wide-eyed as Liska—

No, no, not there. No!

“Liska, relax. Liska!” The Leszy’s voice snaps her back to the present. His face is inches from hers, his eyes peering at her intently. “You need to stay calm. I will not hurt you.”

“Those were my memories,” she says, voice faltering. That place he went... no one goes there. Not even Liska herself.

“The soul and the mind are intertwined,” he explains. “I will try to steer clear of your thoughts, but you must also stay away from them; otherwise you will push them toward me.”

Toward him. He nearly saw... everything. She clasps her hands together, trying to hide their shaking, but the Leszy notices.

His hands are still on her face. He pulls away, takes a breath. “Right. I know this is little comfort, fox, but for seven hundred years I have lived and breathed magic. If you trust nothing else, trust my power. I will not let you be harmed.”

Hesitantly, she searches his face. In the twilight dimness, there is an earnest light in his eyes, a tentative upward tilt to his mouth, softening his features into something adjacent to honesty. For the first time, she senses that he is telling the truth.

She forces her breathing to steady, rolls her shoulders to ease the tension. “Very well,” she says. “Very well, then. Try again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She closes her eyes this time as he touches her. He puts one hand on her cheek, the other on her upper arm, his magic weaving through her, searching for something, something. Again her body slips away, and she enters a realm that is half galaxy, half memory. Again the memories come, irresistible. She sees Mama, this time with Tata, laughing as they dance together. There is Liska’s aunt, letting Marysieńka and Liska share a cup of fresh milk as a cow lows behind her. Then another memory, more vivid this time. Tata is in the barn, repairing the roof, when Pan Prawota storms in, pointing his finger and shouting, shouting so loudly that his veins bulge grotesquely. Liska ducks behind a hay bale, frightened by the noise.

“Do you know the Młynarczyks’ girl has a broken leg from a fall?”

“Of course I do,” says Tata calmly. “My wife was the one who set it.”

Pan Prawota scoffs. “This is all because your daughter led them. The Młynarczyk girl said they were pretending they were pirates. Pirates! Where does she get such ridiculous ideas?”

Tata turns to Pan Prawota, lowering his hammer and smiling politely. “From me. It’s just a story.”

“Just a story,” Pan Prawota says mockingly. He is taller than Tata, with a neck like a stork. “A delusion, is what it is. You think that because your wife is a healer, your family is somehow exempt from the rules?” He stalks closer, draws himself up. “There is something wrong with that child of yours. And I warn you, if you do not teach her to behave, next time I will discipline her myself.”

“Panie Prawota,” Tata says coolly, “even Pani Młynarczyk understands that children do silly things and is angry at no one but the branch that snapped beneath her daughter’s foot. Anyway, since your son was not there, I do suspect that this matter is none of your business.”

Pan Prawota turns purple. “How dare you!”

“How dare you?” Tata returns.

They are so loud, so very loud, and the argument only grows. Liska knows they are angry because of her, and she wishes and wishes and *wishes* she could do something to stop them. As the shouting crescendos, so does her fear, beating panicked wings in her chest. She closes her eyes tight, begs God for it to end. And it does, as a loud *snap* sounds above, and the roof—

“No!” Liska throws herself backward, scrambling away from the memory. She knows the accident that follows, knows that was the last time she saw Tata alive. But there is no reprieve—she is only assaulted by another memory, by Marysieńka collapsing to the ground, a grave and a cross and the surging of butterflies as Liska realizes that they know, they know, and now she has proved them right—

I never meant for it to happen, she wants to shout, but the memories are a trial condemning her, a mirror reflecting a truth she refuses to look into. She closes her eyes tight, but no, she cannot feel her eyes, she cannot close them, and there are blue butterflies everywhere, the color of periwinkles, the color of Mama’s eyes, and Liska’s, too, and the color of sins.

All of a sudden there is shelter. Branches crowd around her, rising up from beneath to obscure her vision, growing over one another to form a cage, no, a *shield*, keeping the butterflies away. Liska grabs the branches, holds them tight, cowers behind them, and—

“Liska! Liska, damn it! Liska, let go!”

But she does not know how. She does not have hands; how can she let go?

Pain. She gasps. Where did she feel that? Her...

Her hand...

The branches curl around her, and suddenly she is being thrust back into her body, back into reality. The memories are gone.

The memories are gone, and she is on the floor.

The memories are gone, and there is a white-haired boy standing over her, holding a dagger, and it is dripping blood. Her blood, it must be, because he does not have any. His veins are filled with tree sap.

He is a demon.

“Leszy,” she gasps.

“Liska, I’m sorry.” He tosses aside the bloodied dagger. He is holding her wrist, palm facing up, and blood leaks between her fingers. There is a slash running across her palm, throbbing with dull pain. Around her, the lines of the chalk circle are smudged beyond recognition.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, pressing his own hand over hers. His eyes are wide, so wide she feels like she could walk into them and find a whole new forest. “I had no choice. You nearly... we both would have been lost.” A chuckle, bemused. “In seven hundred years, I have never seen anything like it. What a pity that...” He trails off. “Never mind. Can you sit up?”

She is staring at him. Slowly her body comes back to her, the heaving of her chest, the pounding of her heart, the growing headache accompanying the throb of her wounded palm.

“You cut me,” she says numbly, easing herself up from the floor on quivering elbows. She does not even have the strength to be surprised when he slides his arm around her shoulders, supporting most of her weight.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I could think of nothing else to bring you back. I must admit, that is probably the fastest I have ever broken a promise.” He takes her bloody hand once more, turning it carefully palm-up. He runs his thumb across the wound, and Liska’s skin twitches in response, sending sharp pain zipping up her arm. Alarmed, she jerks back. As soon as the Leszy releases her hand, the strange sensation stops... and so does the pain. Liska turns her hand over, then back up

again, disbelieving. The wound is closed, reduced to nothing but a scabbed red streak.

“Did you... did you heal me?”

He inclines his head.

“Magic can do that?”

“Only for small wounds,” he says. “Anything more complex requires extreme amounts of energy. Even the most powerful czarownik would struggle with something like, say, a stab wound.” He says it with the certainty of someone who has tried to heal such a wound. And perhaps he has, in his eternal lifespan.

“Thank you,” Liska says weakly.

His gaze sharpens. “Do not thank me. Not when this was my fault.”

She shakes her head. “You were nearly there. I’m the one who panicked; it would have worked if I hadn’t...” How does she explain it to him? The feeling of safety his magic had given her, the way she’d wished to wrap herself in it like armor? She shakes her head. “How... how much did you see?”

“As much as you did,” he says.

Too much. More than anyone has ever seen before. She curls her hand in the fabric of her apron, waiting for the inevitable: questions, or condemnation.

Neither comes. The demon remains silent, watching her like she is a filly walking for the first time. Collecting herself, Liska offers him a sheepish smile. “I presume we can write this off as a failure.”

“Not yet,” he says. “Not quite yet.” He does not explain further, and Liska does not ask. She is far too tired for questions now.

CHAMOMILE PETALS

LISKA LEAVES THE TOWER ON creaking limbs and finds her way to the sitting room. She half collapses on the bear-pelt rug, rubbing at her scarred palm and staring bleakly into the unlit hearth, wishing it would swallow her whole. Eventually the Leszy comes down to find her, accompanied by Jaga. The skrzat hops into Liska's lap while the Leszy leaves again, then returns with a steaming mug smelling of chamomile. He puts it down beside Liska before crouching in front of her and reaching out. She recoils, but he only presses his fingers to her brow, peering at her face intently.

Liska tilts her head. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure my not-so-clever fox is as fine as she says she is." He draws his fingers away but continues to survey her, *study* her, a jeweler trying to decide the value of a rare diamond. Finally he moves his hand—he may be terrible, but he does have lovely hands—and brushes back a curl that has fallen free from her braids.

"When did you get this?" he asks.

It takes her a sluggish second to realize that he is referring to the white streak in her hair, and another to notice that he said "when," not "how." Only then does she connect her own discoloration with the snow-whiteness of his hair, an aged, wintry incongruence against his twenty-something-year-old appearance.

"My magic got out of control," Liska says simply. That is all she is willing to tell him, for it is all she wishes to recall. He seems to sense that, because he leans back.

“So I thought,” he murmurs. “You must have used up a remarkable amount to tax your body so much. Was that when you stopped being able to call on your magic at will?”

She cannot bring herself to nod. Her heart thuds, and she picks up the mug of tea, trying to distract herself. Thankfully, the Leszy doesn’t press. He straightens, pulling at his sleeves, and turns to leave.

“Wait,” Liska hears herself say. “Stay.”

But why? Jaga complains, cracking open an eye.

To Liska’s surprise—and the skrzat’s hiss of disappointment—he does. Feeling strangely shy, Liska focuses on her mug of tea, watching a single chamomile petal eddy on the surface. The Leszy sits gracefully beside her, stretching out his long legs and crossing them at the ankle.

“That memory...,” he begins. “Liska, that wasn’t your doing.”

“Don’t... please.” She exhales a shuddering breath, making the surface of her tea ripple. “Don’t try to absolve me.” Guilt festers inside her like an untended wound, her energy sapped and a headache pounding at her skull. “You know, I don’t think I ever realized the truth until today. Some part of me always knew, but I didn’t... didn’t want to make the connection. And Mama... God, she hid it from me all these years. She knew I killed my own father and hid it from me.” She bites her lip, trying to stop it from trembling. “My magic did that—I did that. I should have known better, Leszy. My parents always warned me not to use it, but there were so many times... so many... if I was scared or I didn’t know what to do...”

“You reach for it instinctively,” he finishes. “That’s not at all unusual, fox. Bursts of power like yours were how czarownik once tracked down potential apprentices. It’s not your fault that these days no one knows what to do with people like you.”

When Liska says nothing, his expression turns contemplative. He shifts onto his knees and hovers his hand before the empty hearth, murmuring in godspeech. A flame catches, and he settles back down. “What if I taught you how to control it?” he asks carefully. “Would you still wish to get rid of it?”

“How could I not?” Liska replies. “It’s dangerous. *I’m* dangerous. I’ve been fighting to hide it since I was young, but there were always incidents. And

Stodoła is a small village. The man you saw, Pan Prawota—his family were our neighbors. They figured out there was something... *different* about me when I was very young and spent most of my childhood scrutinizing me, looking for any way to expose me. My father tried to protect me, but after he died..."

She trails off. After he died, Liska was left to fend off rumors on her own. And that meant being the image of the perfect Orlican girl: docile and pious and helpful, the last person you would suspect of ungodly magic.

"Even if I could control it, Leszy, I cannot risk being discovered. Magic has no place in the mortal world, especially not in a village like mine. I would have to keep on hiding it, and... it's exhausting."

He looks mystified. "Then why go back there at all?"

She blinks. "Why wouldn't I? That's *home*. My family, my village, it's... it's my place, I've worked hard for it to *be* my place. If I—if—if I give it up, then what's the alternative?" She swallows. "If I don't belong there, then where *do* I belong?"

That's just it, isn't it? She has always been Liska from Stodoła, minder of livestock and daughter of a healer. Without her home to define her, she is left with nothing at all. Nothing but her magic and the guilt it carries.

"I understand." The Leszy pitches his voice low, gentler than she has ever heard him. "More than you know. That desire for a home, the safety of a community... there was a time I would have given anything for it. I wish I could say it ended well for me. But you are far more sensible than I was at your age—perhaps yours is a good wish after all."

Liska takes a sip of her tea, now cooled slightly, unable to look completely at him and acknowledge that he knows, *he knows*. "It has to be this way," she whispers.

He makes a sound in the back of his throat, not quite an agreement. "You should get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

He's right for once, Jaga comments. Liska notices the house-spirit and the demon exchanging hostile glares.

"In a minute," she promises them. She puts down her mug and buries both hands in Jaga's fur, forcing breaths through the tightness of her rib cage.

The Leszy stays with her until she finishes her tea and finds enough willpower to haul herself to her feet. She bids him good night and tries to ignore his worried eyes on the back of her neck, his quiet footsteps as he trails after her down the halls until she makes it to her room. It occurs to her, as his footsteps fade away at last, that he is trying to look after her.

She cannot decide how that makes her feel.

ONEGDAJ

THE NEXT DAY, LISKA WAKES with a surprising amount of energy, the kind that leaves her jittery and restless and unable to focus on anything at all. It comes as a relief when the Leszy sweeps into the kitchen like a wild wind and asks her if she is feeling well enough for combat training.

What follows is a merciless lesson where Liska is put through drill after drill, first without the dagger, then with it, each more exhausting than the last. The physical effort keeps her mind far from the events of the previous night, which suits her just fine.

“What is the purpose of all this, anyway?” Liska pants, collapsing to the ground as soon as the Leszy calls a break. “If spirits can be destroyed, why not kill them all instead of locking them inside the Driada?”

“If only it were that simple.” The Leszy crouches in front of her, antlers catching a dim ray of light and splitting it into slender beams. “The problem is that Orlica’s lands are especially potent in magic. No one really knows why, but legend says it was part of the blessing the old gods bestowed upon the tribes who worshipped them.”

Liska moves closer, wiping a bead of sweat that drips down her brow.

“Orlica’s connection to magic means it is far easier for spirits and demons to become anchored to the in-between instead of passing on. As you well know, they wreak havoc, so I created the Driada to act as a sort of siphon, trapping spirits within these boughs before they can materialize anywhere else in Orlica. It’s a flawed magic, of course, and the more powerful ones resist. Sometimes

when I leave the manor, it's to answer a summons and dispatch such rogue spirits."

Liska straightens in surprise. "Summons? So people know you're real?"

"Of course. I have those I trust, priests and nobles and czarownik brethren who know how to contact me. Not just Orlica, but Litven as well, though Litvenian lands do not have the same magical potency." He pauses. "I wasn't lying, Liska Radost, when I said I have dedicated my life to protecting the human realm. It's the only reason I still live."

The reality of his age strikes Liska suddenly. She tilts her head, seeing him in a new light, a glowing veil of epochs and histories and lifetimes. This demon, this boy, has fought in wars from hundreds of years ago and known ancient kings. *Seven hundred years.* That is how long he has been Orlica's protector, seeing it through invasions and uprisings, dynasties and defeats. Yet sometimes he seems so *young* that Liska could imagine him to be hardly older than herself.

The Leszy mirrors her head tilt teasingly. "What is it?"

There is something filling her, overflowing past the brim, a mead-warm feeling too melancholy to be called gratitude. She reaches out and puts her hand over his, long and pale where it rests on his knees.

He twitches, his breath stuttering, as if her touch is lightning, as if he expects to burst aflame. When she looks up, his eyes are wide and bright and bewildered.

"You've endured so much for us," Liska whispers.

"It's my duty," he says.

"Thank you." She holds his hand until his shoulders loosen, until he knows she means it. *"Thank you."*

The way he looks at her, it is like she has spoken absolution to a man condemned. He does not let the moment linger—he jerks his hand out from beneath hers and lurches to his feet, pushing his sleeves up higher.

"Right," he says tersely. "Enough rest. Let us try sparring, since you cannot sweet-talk your way to a strzygoń's heart."

When they finish, it is long past noon, and the meadow looks as if it has been trampled by a herd of horses. Liska, soaked with sweat, drops to her knees in front of a bucket of well water and splashes herself, watching droplets fall from her curls and onto the grass.

The Leszy stops in front of her, looking like he has enough energy left to fight an army. “Need a hand?”

Sighing, she reaches out with an aching arm. He takes it, his long fingers nearly engulfing her small ones, and pulls her easily to her feet.

“You should name it,” the Leszy says, releasing her hand and gesturing to the dagger at her side, tucked inside a new sheath—another demon-bestowed gift.

“Name it?” she echoes.

“They say names make silver weapons more powerful.”

She thinks of his emerald-pommeled sword. “What’s yours called?”

“Wyrok,” he replies. *Judgment*. A fitting name indeed.

Liska runs her fingers over her dagger’s hilt, tracing the doe’s carved muzzle. The name comes to her in a breath, like a wish.

“Onegdaj.” A word meaning “the past,” meaning “a time before.” A time she would like to return to, yet a time she wishes she could have changed. The thing that haunts her and that has shaped her. The place she belongs.

The past: a weapon, her protector.

When she looks at the Leszy, his eyes are distant and shadowed, as if he is recalling something from centuries ago.



With combat training added to Liska’s routine, the summer days become like flares, arriving with sudden brightness and ending just as swiftly. She finds it hard to believe she has been in the Driada for over a month now—they have reached August, golden and stifling, the world drowsy in its grip. It is on one such day that the Leszy finds Liska sitting down for breakfast and puts a list of godspeech words in front of her eggs.

“Learn as many as you can,” he says. “Once you have your magic back, you will be able to control it far better if you can formulate spells.”

The words are simple, commands like *grow* and *burn* and *protect me*. Liska takes to the language quickly—it’s not completely dissimilar to Orlican. At first she can feel Mama’s glare on her back, berating her for learning words in a pagan language. But soon enough Liska finds herself whispering the words in the halls

and garden, enamored by their swooping vowels and the easy way they flow from her tongue, familiar as a nursery rhyme.

Between studying and combat, she has very little time for cooking, a fact she laments to the Leszy one night to his answering look of unconcern. They have just finished an evening spar, and the Driada's night announces its arrival with cricket calls and distant howls.

"You know, I do not require much at all," says the Leszy. "Before you came, I lived off whatever offerings I was given. Sometimes it was a feast, sometimes it was a loaf of bread. A demon's body is not demanding."

Liska glances toward the House Under the Rowan Tree, towering above them in all its honeysuckle-cloaked, crooked-tower, chipped-paint glory. "Perhaps, but all we've left from yesterday's meal is potatoes and your, ah... *interesting* soup." She gives the Leszy a pointed look. He had insisted on making dinner the previous day, and though Liska has never been to the ocean, she is convinced it would taste exactly like his concoction. "Really, Leszy, after seven hundred years, I would expect you to be better at cooking."

He scowls, almost petulant. "I've been *busy*."

"*Seven hundred* years," Liska repeats. "Surely there are cookbooks in the library." She winces, realizing her mistake—she tries to avoid mentioning the library, or Florian.

But if the Leszy is displeased, he does not show it. "Fine. *Fine*. Perhaps I was in a hurry, and I tossed in too much salt. Perhaps I am so used to looking after the wood and only the wood that I've forgotten how to care about anything else."

She pauses, surprised at the confession. His face again has that honest shine, the one he keeps shuttering away as soon as it breaks through. It makes Liska's chest warm strangely. She sheathes Onegdaj and unhitches her skirt, letting it unfurl to its full length around her ankles, then tucks back a few loose strands of hair. When she looks up, the Leszy is watching her—their eyes clash like swords, and he averts his gaze.

Strange. Liska heads for the manor, weaving her way between tangled weeds and stepping onto the flagstone path. Before entering, she turns and surveys the garden, the trees heavy with fruit and flowers swayed by frantic honeybees.

“Will they grow through the winter?” she asks the Leszy, who comes up behind her with near-silent steps. She smells him more than hears him, pine sap and bitter herbs and the cold sharpness of a brewing storm.

“No,” he replies. “I wish I could make them live, but alas, some things must die to grow again stronger. I can bend nature’s laws, but it is best not to break them. It will be the usual bleak winter.”

“I’ve made preserves,” Liska assures him.

He sniffs. “Unnecessary.”

She turns on her heel. “Maybe for you, but *I* have standards.” She wants to touch his arm playfully, but somehow her hand ends up against the solid muscle of his chest. *Thud*. Her stomach wraps around itself, and her thoughts dissipate like smoke.

The Leszy freezes for a heartbeat before stepping away. His throat bobs as he busies himself buttoning his sukmana.

“I’m going to the market tomorrow,” he says briskly. “You may come.”

“The market?” She eyes his antlers. “In Orlica?”

“The people of Wałkowo are used to my visits by now,” he says. “At least I assume so, since they’ve stopped screaming at the mere sight of me.”

With that, he strides into the manor. Liska raises her eyebrows at his retreating back, her stomach still tangled in knots. She waits until he is gone before making her way to the kitchen, assuaging her hunger with a bowl of oversalted soup before escaping to the sitting room. There, she shoves her nose in a chapter of the *Czarologia* and ignores the lingering hotness of her cheeks.

Your face is red, says Jaga pleasantly, appearing between Liska’s arms and blocking the pages from view.

Liska lowers the book to her knees and runs her hands over her face. “It’s nothing,” she says quickly. “I’m just tired.”

You’re beginning to like him, aren’t you? the skrzat asks, narrowing her eyes. There is no use asking who she is talking about.

Liska tilts her head back, wishing she could vanish into the star-dappled ceiling. “He’s a seven-hundred-year-old demon, Jaga. I’m not foolish enough for that.”

As soon as the words leave her mouth, her heart gives an accusatory pang. *Liar*. Of course she likes him; she has always been eager to trust, eager to love, seeking warmth no matter how many times she is burned. “Anyway,” she adds defensively, “I think he only cares for me because he wants me to use my magic.”

Jaga twitches an ear. *He enjoys your presence, certainly, but enjoyment is a selfish feeling. I mistook it for friendship once, and he banished me in an angry tantrum.*

“I know.” Liska sighs. “I’m still being careful, I promise.” She flips open the book again, but her thoughts are already elsewhere, anticipating tomorrow’s trip to Orlica. “I ought to check the larder to see what needs stocking,” she notes under her breath. A part of her is buzzing with excitement to return to the human world. The other part sits heavy with dread.

Why go back there at all? the Leszy’s smooth voice asks again, sending a shudder down Liska’s spine. She presses a knuckle to her lips hard enough to hurt, reins in her treacherous thoughts, and forces herself to focus on reading.

Time slips away. Midnight arrives, heralded by the distant call of the parlor clock and the heaviness of Liska’s eyelids. Exhaling, she bookmarks her page with a dried lavender sprig and closes the *Czarologia*, smoothing out the fraying cover.

In that moment, the forest *screams*.

The candles all puff out at once. Outside, where moonlight suffuses the canopy, the Driada’s trees shudder and bend, their bark screeching as they collide. A heartbeat, and it all ceases, the candles easing back to life. But their light remains weak, as if the manor is cowering in fear before *something*.

Liska is on her feet, Onegdaj in her hand. “What was that?”

Jaga has gone stock-still. *Something is wrong with the wood.*

Liska runs from the room. Within seconds she is on the staircase, nearly colliding with the Leszy as he races down the steps.

“Go to your room. Lock the door.” She has never seen fear written so clearly on his face.

“What’s happening?”

“Something broke my wards.” His sword is in one hand, his skull-mask in another. “Something big.”

At the door, one of his sentinel-moths appears, shooting through a crack in the window and soaring for the Leszy's chest. It passes through his skin; his body twitches in response, the bone of his sternum and ribs briefly visible as the glowing creature melts into him.

The Leszy's eyes go mist-white, then back to green. "Wałkowo," he says.

Wałkowo: the town that he mentioned earlier. "What happened?"

"I do not know," he says hoarsely. "I cannot sense anything beyond the wood. But that moth was given to an old friend of mine, to send for me if there is ever dire need. If it's here..."

He trails off, but Liska is already moving, lacing up her boots and grabbing a cloak.

"What are you doing?" the Leszy demands.

"I'm coming with you."

"Absolutely not."

"I was raised by the best healer in the border villages," she says reasonably. "If anyone is hurt, I can help."

"No," he says firmly. "I am not bringing you into unknown danger."

The memory of the last time the Leszy left like this—of waiting, unsure of his fate, and the panic after his return—fuels Liska's resolve. She will not be left behind again. "Was I not supposed to serve at your side?" Her fingers scrape over the rough wool of the cloak. "I cannot do that if you leave me here. This could be a chance for me to *learn*, Leszy."

He presses his lips together, eyes seeming to smolder as he glowers. "Fine," he says at last, grudgingly stepping out of her way. "But you are to do exactly as I say, understood? No matter what."

She nods, and he protests no more as she follows, fastening the cloak around her shoulders and pursuing him into a midnight cold and fitful. Getting to Wałkowo takes four heartbeats: *beat*, and the Leszy is a stag. *Beat*, and Liska is clambering onto his back. *Beat*, and they are bounding through the wood at breakneck speed. *Beat*, and there is an opening tree trunk, and there is a village, and there is chaos.

THE DRIADA'S GAMBIT

THE LESZY'S SPELLDOOR SPITS THEM out of a tree in the town square of Wałkowo, a tight, muddy marketplace crowded by storefronts with crooked shutters. The Leszy transforms beneath Liska in a disorienting muddle of rot and twisting limbs; she is in his arms, then on her feet. The Leszy is now human, though he has not taken off his skull; once again the pale-skinned ghoul.

Their arrival is met by screams.

Townfolk. Oh so many, milling about, rushing, shouting, worrying. Some hold pitchforks or rifles, others clutch crying children, most stand in nothing but nightwear. All of them are women. They are a flock of white chemises and slippers and bleary faces, obviously roused from sleep. As soon as they see the Leszy, their faces grow drawn and hesitant, a din of exclamations rising from the crowd. Liska even hears a woman murmur, "The pale man is here. What does it mean?"

"Quiet!"

An elderly woman shoulders her way toward them. Like the oldest books in the Leszy's library, she is history embodied, wrinkled skin like old paper and eyes milky as binding glue. She looks over the Leszy steadily, eyes widening a fraction when she notices Liska.

"Quiet, ladies," she repeats, leaning on the rifle she holds. "He is here to help."

"What's going on, Kazimiera?" The Leszy's eyes flicker over the crowd, sharp with realization. "And where are the men?"

“Gone,” sobs a yellow-haired woman barely older than Liska, speaking over the wails of the toddler in her arms. “They all rose from their beds at once. We couldn’t stop them; we...”

As if on cue, a melody rises from beyond the town. Female song, a chorus of voices, weaving a tapestry of seductive notes and gentle caresses. Liska knows the sound. It tried to ensnare her weeks ago, during her search for the fern flower.

“Rusalka,” she whispers.

The Leszy’s shoulders stiffen in alarm, but his voice remains clear and steady as he addresses the old woman. “Where are they now, Kazimiera?”

“They left the town gates mere minutes ago,” Kazimiera replies. “There is not much time—it is only a few minutes’ walk to the Driada. We tried to stop them, but they overpowered us. Is there any way to call them back?”

The Leszy shakes his head. “Once they are ensnared, the only way to free them is to kill the rusalka whose spell they are under.” With a swift pull, he unsheathes Wyrok, the blade gleaming in the lamplight. “I will take care of it.”

“I will come,” says Kazimiera. “I’ve enough strength in me for one more battle.” The last word is proud, as if daring the Leszy to deny it. When he makes an affirmative sound, Liska looks at him, startled—Kazimiera must be at least seventy years old. How will she survive against demons?

Clearly the Leszy does not share Liska’s concern. He takes off down the dirt road, Kazimiera at his side. Liska tails them, barely keeping ahead of the press of women; many are praying, their whispers carrying through the town and drowning out the rusalka song.

Wałkowo proves to be more small city than large town, with high stone walls guarding the border, bearing gates of heavy wood. The gates yawn open, revealing farming fields and rolling hillsides beyond, cut off by the ink-black mass of the Driada. The main road, wide enough for carts, continues through the gates and down a gentle slope, leading to a tunnel-like path cut through the trees.

Along it walk the men of Wałkowo.

They are mere meters from the wood, ominous silhouettes in the distance. There is something terribly *wrong* with the way they walk—they seem caught in

a trance, stumbling along as if dragged by ropes, their heads lolling and arms extended

Between the trees wait a dozen rusalka. They glow eerie white, long silver hair covering their breasts, unnaturally long limbs clutched around trunks in anticipation. Liska blinks, and she can see their true forms shining through their unnatural beauty, grisly too-long smiles and glassy eyes and sagging skin.

Her gut clenches in panic.

“They’re beautiful,” murmurs a woman to Liska’s left, stepping forward.

Hearing her, the Leszy snaps, “Close the gates behind us. Liska, you stay with the women.”

“But—”

“Do it!”

He takes off at a sprint down the path, side by side with Kazimiera, who straightens, throwing age off her shoulders. Branches gather around the Leszy, and as the gates creak closed, Liska swears she sees Kazimiera pull a sword, wider even than Wyrok, out of thin air.

Bang. The gates slam shut, and Liska sees no more. Around her, women shift and mingle restlessly. They stare at Liska, unsure what to make of her.

Liska wraps her arms around her chest. Beyond the gates, the song rises once more. This time another voice joins it, coasting over the melody, all sharp notes and pleading lilt. A child’s voice.

“My boy is out there!” cries the yellow-haired woman from earlier. Her child remains in her arms.

“No, he isn’t,” Liska says sharply. She recalls how the rusalka she met in the Driada had imitated Mama’s voice. “He’s in your arms. Look. *Look.*” Liska steps forth to grab the woman’s shoulders, forcing her to meet her gaze. Together, they look down at the toddler she holds.

“Safe,” the woman whispers in relief.

“Yes,” Liska replies gently, stepping back. Something powerful surges in her, a desire to help, to protect, but stronger than ever before, amplified by every woman clustered around her.

“Listen!” she calls out. “They are trying to lure you out too! If you see someone moving toward the gate, stop them, pull them back, tie them down if

you must.”

But that will not be enough. The rusalka play with desires, with fear. “Keep praying!” she cries. “Focus on the words and nothing else!” Taking initiative, she begins to recite the first lines of the rosary. The women join in quickly, one by one. Their shuffling stops, and the wailing of children settles into occasional sobs as their panicked prayer rises up like a chant.

Beyond, far beyond the gates, there comes a dismayed shriek, then another, a few voices vanishing from the monstrous choir. The sound of a sword strike. A familiar shout—the Leszy’s?

Before Liska can consider it, a cackling laugh carries across the rooftops.

Prayers begin to die on the lips of the town women. Another laugh comes, and they fall into horrified silence. Then another, and another, and *another*, like wolves joining a howl, mirthless laughs filled with hunger. Pure, undiluted, *unearthly* hunger.

The closest one echoes just over their heads.

Liska’s breath hitches. Onegdaj raised, she whirls toward the sound.

On the rooftop crouches a strzygoń.

This one is not a newborn. It is fully formed, black leathery skin stretched taut over crooked limbs, knobby, bent-backward knees ending in contorted feet, and hands like owl talons dripping ink-black poison onto the cobbles below. Its eyes are too large, wide and white with pupils shrunk to nothing but pinpricks, the mouth beneath sneering open to reveal two rows of human teeth. Ragged feathers extend like spines along its back, rippling as it rolls its shoulders.

Liska’s vision narrows to nothing but herself and the creature.

The strzygoń lunges.

Somewhere in her panicked haze, Liska recalls the Leszy’s lessons. Instinctively she moves aside, narrowly avoiding the whistling strike of the demon’s talons. It lands on the ground in a crouch and whirls with unnatural speed, this time leaping for Liska’s throat. What follows is a series of little miracles: Liska dodges aside—miracle. Liska grabs the strzygoń’s bony wrist, turns it away from her—miracle. Liska lodges Onegdaj in its neck—miracle. Vertebrae cave under the dagger’s blade—miracle.

The miracles end there. Liska barely has time to step clear of the strzygoń's disintegrating body when more laughter greets her, closer now. Adrenaline pumps an urgent throb through her ears as she looks up.

There are dozens of demons crouched overhead.

The women begin to scream. Strzygoń leap down from the buildings, undeterred by pitchforks or gunshots or screamed prayers. Their talons rise and fall, drawing arcs of blood. Liska's stomach sinks. They are no better than calves for slaughter here, corralled against the city walls. The Driada has tricked them, luring the Leszy and Kazimiera away, and now the butchering has begun.

The butchering has begun, and Liska is all they have.

That thought is enough. She springs into action, hitching up her skirts as she runs, barreling toward the nearest strzygoń as it sinks its claws into a woman's shoulder. The magic in Liska's chest awakens, slamming against her rib cage, demanding to be freed. Every collision shoots energy through her veins.

The strzygoń's talons flash toward her, but she severs them with a sweep of Onegdaj, thrusts the dagger through its neck, turns and runs for the next one before the first one finishes disintegrating. She leaps in front of a shrieking child, shoving it out of the way and kicking back a charging strzygoń. The monster attempts to slash Liska's abdomen, but she blocks its wrist with one arm, using the opening to thrust Onegdaj in and out of its chest. It doubles over with a shriek, and Liska slices her blade deep through the back of its neck. This time the demon dissolves slowly, Onegdaj lodged in the bone of its spine. As Liska jerks the blade free, it lashes out in a final, desperate act.

Time seems to slow. Liska draws back, but it is too late—the claws find their mark, carving three brutal streaks across her shoulder and collarbone.

Pain explodes through her body, sending her crumpling to her knees. "Get up!" someone shouts—the yellow-haired woman, grabbing her arm, heaving Liska to her feet with one hand, a pitchfork in the other. Liska sways, then nearly collapses as another villager jostles her. Ahead, a mother screams her child's name, caught in a cluster of other frightened townspeople. The yellow-haired woman steps in front of Liska as a strzygoń leaps toward them, impaling the creature with her pitchfork mid-jump. But it is not enough—the wood splinters as the strzygoń peels itself off the tines and lunges once more.

Liska moves, slow with pain, far too slow. The yellow-haired woman screams, cut off in a gurgle when the strzygoń's claws pierce her throat. She slumps at Liska's feet, convulsing once, blood gushing from her neck. Then her eyes are blank and her head is lolling and she is dead, dead, dead.

Liska is not enough.

She has not done enough.

She is going to die, but she accepted that fate when she stepped into the Driada in search of a legend. These women did not have that choice. Fate simply decreed they must fall to the wood, and so they will. There is nothing Liska can do.

No. There is one thing left, but she shouldn't trust it, cannot trust it.

Butterflies. Desperate, slamming against her innards, drowning out the pain that throbs across her collarbone. Gasping in frustration, Liska wraps her arms around her chest. She begins to fight it off, the chaos of her magic brimming at her skin, then falters. Chaos could be exactly what she needs right now. It could be enough to stop the strzygoń, or at least gain their attention.

Remember what you did last time? her mind whispers. If you free it, you will truly become a monster.

"Fine," Liska hisses, blood leaking down her arm. "Then let me be a monster."

She lets herself *shatter*. Pale blue light blossoms from her chest, from her heart. It courses through her veins, traces the silhouettes of her bones against her skin, haloes her in brilliant rays. And from her chest, with a resounding *boom*, explode butterflies.

Thousands of them, a flood of wings and brilliance and power, blue as wildflowers and shallow streams and frosty spring skies. Such delicate things, yet agents of ruin.

To czarownik, everything has a soul.

Liska's awareness expands. Through her magic, she can sense the current of power weaving through all things, binding souls and bodies with pure, thrumming magic. The in-between... it is *everywhere*, and for the first time she understands it. The earth beneath her feet—there are souls there, seeds and roots she can manipulate into growth. But when she reaches for them, they resist her,

stubborn as a mountain. But there—yes, there, the city well. Water beneath, calling to her. A simple creature, a slumbering entity, vast as oceans are wide.

Magic is the art of manipulating souls, of asking things to become other things.

The butterflies plunge into the well. Liska feels a piece of herself *leave* as she reaches out with her magic, her breath coming in exhausted, strained gasps. In response, something awakens, stirring at her touch. Water, ready to be commanded. Above, the battle still rages.

But water is no weapon. It is fluid, not solid. She has it, but how will she use it?

All I do is give them a command.

Liska's hands move instinctively, as if to shape the spell with her palms. She pictures the strzygoń pierced by arrows, dropping one by one, and gives her godspeech command.

“Be my weapon.”

A geyser of crystalline water bursts from the well, writhing and crackling, a diamond sheen running along its length. It solidifies into vines of ice, curling and lashing through the city square like the tentacles of an ocean beast. Their ends are sharp, lethal, seeking out one target only: the strzygoń.

The ice vines pierce the demons wherever they can—neck, chest, skull. Now that Liska has spoken the words, the spell is out of her control, the water executing her command in the best way it knows. It is a beautiful sort of devastation, a glittering chaos, and it ends as quickly as it began. Once every demon lies prone, the ice vines shatter and splash to the ground, their magic spent, nothing but water once more.

Liska collapses against a wall behind her, breathing too shallow, lungs starved for air but lacking the energy to take in more. Ahead, the narrow streets of Wałkowo are littered with corpses, blood sticking to walls like dark honey. The strzygoń have collapsed as well, dissolving as they thrash and scream.

There is a boy, alone in the middle of it all, no older than eleven or twelve. He is crying. Liska wants to call out to him, but she is too weak, and he has already vanished into the dark. The city gates are open—when did they open?—and Kazimiera is there, at Liska's side, milky eyes shining with concern. “Eliasz!” she calls out. “She's here.”

Liska sees all through a fog of pain, every minute threatening to drag her further into the realm of unconsciousness. When the Leszy comes, it is like the moon emerging from clouds on a murky midnight. He is holding Wyrok, splattered with black demon blood that drips from the edge. Seeing Liska, he sheathes the blade and crouches at her side. He raises his hands and unclips the deer-skull mask, his eyes fatigued as he looks her over.

“Liska,” he says urgently. “Liska, what did you do?”

“I’m sorry.” The words are automatic, fading like smoke as they leave her lips. “I was only trying to help.”

“And you did,” Kazimiera says, looking around. “You did well, girl. Now lie still.” The old woman pulls at Liska’s cloak, drawing it away to reveal the strzygoń’s claw marks. The wounds are deep and gruesome, spitting syrup-thick blood. What skin remains around them has turned a poisoned black.

The Leszy’s eyes widen, his audible gasp a condemnation. *Fatal*, Liska thinks with distant amusement. Fitting, that she should be killed by a demon after all.

“Will the potion help?” Kazimiera asks urgently.

“No. No, it will not work on her. My body is more spirit than human—I can fight off the corruption with my magic. But mortals...” Through her darkening vision, Liska sees only the bob of his throat. “Mortals cannot. Unless...” He straightens suddenly. “Unless I took it into myself.”

“That’s impossible,” Kazimiera cuts in. “The poison corrupts the soul and the body at once. No one can take from another’s soul.”

“I have to try,” he says, voice fraying. “I have to.” His fingertips brush Liska’s cheek, and they feel like flames, like ice shards, like light at the end of an endless night. “Fox, stay awake. Open yourself to me, just as you did during the soul-searching spell, all right?”

Kazimiera seizes his arm. “Eliasz, it cannot be done. *Eliasz*.”

The Leszy shrugs her off, eyes locked on Liska’s. “All right?”

Even nodding is painful. Her body feels leaden, a dead weight as the Leszy pulls her into his arms, ignoring Kazimiera’s protests. His hand cups her face. When his magic scatters across her skin, its erratic touch is almost soothing. Her body escapes from her, her consciousness fading rapidly. Memories flash by, but this time the Leszy weaves between them. His magic plunges deeper, searching

for something, something. For that brief instant, a tiny eternity, their magics are one, their souls entangled.

Then he finds it—a darkness spreading from her shoulder, eating the light from her thoughts and the strength from her limbs—and *pulls*.

THE WOOD MUST ALWAYS HAVE A WARDEN

THE AGONY IS A WILDFIRE. It sparks to life, erupting into a red-hot blaze that sears through Liska's limbs. It fades just as quickly, the Leszy's magic a downpour that comes at last to extinguish it. Only pain, unlike flame, cannot disappear. She knows the Leszy has drawn it into himself—she hears his agonized growl, feels his hands tighten inadvertently around her. Even then, his grip is gentle, grounding Liska, pulling her back to life from the depths of poisoned darkness.

Her consciousness is ice, and she cannot find her footing on its surface. In and out she slips, her body trying to succumb to darkness, yet her mind clinging to reality. Her shoulder throbs wickedly, and above she hears muffled voices:

“It... it worked.” This from Kazimiera, stunned. “What did you do, Eliasz? How did you—mother of God, what does this *mean*?”

“It means she will live,” the Leszy replies, tone filled with astonished relief. There is a pause, during which he releases his grip on her shoulder to fumble for something. A gulp—presumably downing one of his potions—then a shift beneath her.

“Stop that,” snaps Kazimiera. “Whatever you just did, I *felt* how much energy you used. Any more and you will keel over.”

“I can handle it, Kazimiera.”

“All you can handle right now is sleep,” the old woman chides him. “Besides, we both know I’m the stronger healer. I cannot understand why you are being so defensive.”

“I’m not being defensive, I’m being pragmatic.”

“Yes, I suppose it’s all that pragmatism that’s making your hands shake.”

A pause. “*Fine*. Do it, then, but do it fast. I cannot bear the sound of weeping peasants.” There is a tightness there, hidden in his cynicism, a deep grief clawing its way out from behind his façade.

“Let’s get her out of this chaos first,” Kazimiera says. “Come, my home should be far enough.”

Liska does not struggle as the Leszy lifts her easily in his arms. In her disorientation, she cannot stop her head from falling against his chest, firm and cool and smelling of battle, of iron and sweat and, distantly, the earthy aroma of the Driada. She clings to that scent, plunges into it, sinking until darkness finds her.



A memory: Marysieńka runs up to Liska after Sunday Mass, hooking her arm through Liska’s and dragging her toward the stone walls that surround Saint Jerzy, the humble village chapel. They pass village women flocked together like colorful birds, all floral skirts and brightly hued kerchiefs, red bead necklaces and chattering gossip. Liska bumps into the miller’s wife and turns with an apologetic, “I’m so sorry!” before Marysieńka half manhandles her through the iron gate and into the town square.

“God, Maryś, what is it?” Liska exclaims. This level of energy is normal for her cousin, but the shakiness of her grip is not.

“There is something I need to tell you,” she says. “My mother is talking about it all through the churchyard, but I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

“Go on,” Liska says, curiosity piqued.

“I’m engaged to be married.”

Liska chokes on the frostbitten air. “What?” Frankly, she should not be this surprised—at seventeen, they are both of marrying age, and they have already whispered about potential suitors from the village, based off flirtatious glances

caught across church pews or flowers gifted awkwardly at the Stodoła well. But that was all it was: playful gossip. This—this makes it all too real.

“And you didn’t tell me about it?” Liska exclaims. “To whom?” When Marysieńka looks away, uncharacteristically demure, she exclaims, “Maryś!”

“T-Tomasz.” Her cousin forces it out in the direction of her heeled boots, unable to look Liska in the eye. “Tomasz Prawota.”

Liska’s stomach sinks like a stone. She searches her cousin’s earnest face for a hint that this is all an elaborate joke and finds none. “Maryś...”

“I know,” her cousin says. “I know what you’re thinking. That’s why I didn’t tell you he was courting me. It—it all happened so fast. But he’s really not so bad once you get to know him, and his family has much land, and... and I’m going to have to marry anyway, so why not to someone who can offer me stability, and—”

“But...” Liska looks up, trying to force the taller Marysieńka to meet her eyes. “But what about the city?”

“What about the city?” Marysieńka says sharply.

“That was your dream! To leave the village, have your adventure. If you do this...”

“You think I don’t know that?” There is fire in Marysieńka’s eyes, and Liska realizes she is just as anguished about this as Liska. “But the arrangement has been made, and anyway, I couldn’t afford to move to the city, not without a husband to support me. You think there is much work to be given to lone women from border villages without a coin to their names?” Marysieńka shakes her head, ribbon-tied blond braids swishing with the movement. “No, Liska, this is my only chance. Perhaps one day, I can convince Tomasz to move to the city with me. But until then... I have to do this.” She offers Liska an apologetic smile. “Anyway, he has matured a lot since we were children. He’s quite charming now.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, Maryś. You didn’t see how he and his mother were glaring at me in church earlier. Like they were waiting for horns to appear on my head.”

Marysieńka crosses her arms defensively. “It’s only because he doesn’t know better! Pani Prawota is very stubborn, and Pan Prawota too, and they never let

him speak against them. But I can change his mind, Liska, I'm sure of it. With me he has been nothing but kind."

Liska knows, in a hollowed-out place beneath her ribs, that Marysienka has just told her two lies. Still, she wants her cousin's happiness. She wants to believe all will end well.

That is her first mistake.



The next time Liska wakes, she is lying on a straw-stuffed bed in a sparsely furnished single-room hovel. Kazimiera is leaning over her, suffused in strange golden light, holding her hands over Liska's wounds. Liska twitches, gasping—beneath Kazimiera's touch, her skin feels as if it has come alive, writhing and twinging, shooting bolts of pain down her arm.

"I know it's not very pleasant," the old woman says. "But I'm almost done. Just lie still a little longer."

"You're a witch," Liska manages hoarsely, her heartbeat rising.

Kazimiera scoffs. "Yes, I sacrificed four virgin men so I could heal your wounds. Honestly, Elias, what have you been teaching her?"

"She's a village girl," the Leszy drawls from somewhere in Liska's periphery. "They are rather superstitious folk."

"N-no—" Liska scrambles to explain herself, then jolts as another spark of pain shoots up her arm. It is, she realizes, a similar sensation to that of the Leszy's healing spell, only amplified tenfold. "I mean, you're a czarownik. A female czarownik. I was told that... that women who used magic would go mad." Despite all she has learned, she still lingers on that part of Father Paweł's lecture. Seeing Kazimiera use magic so easily... it's *hope*—evidence that there is a chance, no matter how small, that she could one day control her powers.

Kazimiera, on the other hand, is scowling. "All changes in the world but the ways of men," she says venomously. "When I first came into my powers, I was told the same thing. Do you know why?" She doesn't wait for a response. "Because women are inherently more powerful in magic. Yes, it also makes it easier for us to lose control as children, but once we reach our potential... then we are unstoppable. Men could have never stayed in power if they allowed us to

thrive. So they spread rumors and refused to take us on as apprentices, and here we are.” She clicks her tongue. “I ought to have taken Orlica’s crown for myself and put an end to all their idiocy. Probably could have prevented a few wars while I was at it.”

“I see centuries have done nothing to temper your melodrama,” the Leszy remarks. Kazimiera throws him a glare that could make the Driada wither.

“Centuries,” Liska interrupts, trying to divert the conversation. “How have you lived so long, Pani?”

“Magic, my girl,” Kazimiera says. “There are spells and rituals that can keep us alive as long as we avoid mortal wounds. You will learn them in time, if you are who I think you are.” She looks over to the Leszy again. “She *is* your apprentice, isn’t she?”

“She’s my servant,” the demon replies tartly. “We made a bargain.”

“Servant. Bah.” Kazimiera waves her hand. “I do not think you would challenge the laws of magic for a mere servant, Eliasz Kowal.”

Challenge the laws of magic? Liska can hardly remember anything after she collapsed, but she does recall the resignation in Kazimiera’s voice, saying *It cannot be done*. The Leszy saved her life, doing something Kazimiera thought impossible. But of course he would. He is always one step ahead of everyone else, always hiding another secret. He saved Liska because he is after her powers, nothing more.

And yet she can’t help but feel warmth spark inside her. “Eliasz,” she echoes, trying out the name. It courses silkily along her tongue, like rain over tree leaves. “Is that your real name, Leszy?”

“One of many,” Kazimiera confirms with amusement. “Eliasz Kowal, the White Warden, Lord of the Spirit-Wood, and so on and so forth. He’s had many titles, each more extravagant than the last.”

The Leszy snorts disdainfully.

Kazimiera lowers her hands to the bedside and straightens. “There, girl. That’s as good as it’s going to get.” She surveys her handiwork, lips tightening with displeasure. “It’s adamant about scarring, I’m afraid.”

Liska braves a look down at the wound. At some point Kazimiera must have removed her cloak and outerwear, because she is wearing only her blouse and

skirt. The strzygoń's claws shredded the delicate linen of her blouse, and the skin beneath has been washed to give a clear view of the wound, or what is left of it—three twisted, ropy scars crawling across her shoulder and collarbone, the longest reaching her sternum. They are grisly, and Liska instinctively wants to cover them up, worried that the townspeople might think her unsightly.

The Leszy approaches. He is looking at her scars too, but there is no disgust on his face. In fact, he seems almost... awed. Before either of them can say anything, Kazimiera wipes her hands on her apron. "I must go see to the other villagers. Someone has ridden off to the city to fetch a physician, but it will be a day at least before they return."

"I can help," Liska says immediately, pushing herself up on her elbows. "My mother is a healer—I know my way around herbs." As she rises, nausea sweeps over her, sending the world into a dizzying whirl. She nearly topples off the bed before the Leszy catches her.

"You're not going anywhere, fox."

"Neither are you, Eliasz," Kazimiera calls. "I'm perfectly aware of your self-martyring tendencies. Both of you need to rest and restore your energy before you so much as look at magic." She pulls a worn floral shawl over her shoulders. "And that's final."

She leaves with a whirl of the shawl's tassels and a slam of the door. Now that Liska and the Leszy are alone, the air between them grows tense, filled with unspoken questions and the *pop* of sap from the lit stove. Beyond the window's crooked shutters, sunrise drags silver talons across the sky, while over the table, a pajak—a decorative hanging of paper flowers and straw—rocks back and forth in a stray breeze.

It is Liska who speaks first, breaking the silence. "What happened out there, Leszy?"

The question seems to sap years from his life. "A gambit of sorts." He sits on the floor at the foot of Liska's bed, pulling one leg up to his chest and extending the other. "The demons were... cooperating. The rusalka lured the men out of the village while the strzygoń crept out of the woods to attack the vulnerable villagers left behind. I found the crack in my wards where they got out." He tilts his head back, white hair escaping its hasty ponytail to scatter across his

forehead. Liska has a strange impulse to brush it back from his eyes, but she folds her hands in her lap and resists the temptation.

“It has been... a few centuries since I last saw an event like this. But—no, this was worse. Worse than that time. There were so many... even Kazimiera and I could hardly hold them back. And you...” He must be near delirious with fatigue, because his face softens when he looks at her. “You saved us, not-so-clever fox.”

She rubs at the scars on her shoulder. “I don’t even know what I did.”

“I gathered from the townsfolk that you turned the well water into something—arrows, some say; vines, say others. Whatever it was, it was no random burst of magic.” He shifts until he is on his knees, his face canted up. “You utterly mad, impetuous thing,” he breathes. “You did it. You freed your magic.”

“I don’t know,” she replies, looking down at her hands. For the first time since her spell, she turns her focus inward, searching for the fluttering power she used to feel in her chest. The one that vanished after... what she did. What she encounters is a great, vast hollow. Whatever she freed during the battle, it’s retreated once more.

“I didn’t do it, Leszy,” she says dejectedly. “I had it for a moment; I know I did. But now... I can’t feel it again. It’s gone right back to the way it was before.”

A crease forms between his brows, but if he is troubled, he hides it well. “Never mind that. If you can do it once, you can do it again. Clearly all you need is the right push.”

“What if that push is death, Leszy?” she whispers. “What if all I am good for is destruction?”

She is surprised to hear him chuckle. “Oh, please. You, who carry spiders from the house because you can’t bring yourself to kill them, and probably would have tried befriending a ghost hound if I hadn’t banished it? Don’t make me laugh.”

Somehow his teasing manages to comfort her. She feels known for the slightest of moments, shorter than the fall of a raindrop or the chirp of a songbird. It’s unsettling to realize that he might understand her better than

anyone has before. More than Mama, more than Tata, more even than Marysienka.

The reminder of home brings a sudden question to mind: What if the townsfolk of Stodoła learn what happened here? What if they find out she was seen side by side with a demon?

“What is it?” the Leszy asks.

Liska tells him, and he shakes his head reassuringly.

“You would be far from the first strange story to come out of this town,” he says. “Its proximity to the Driada makes it a way-stop for travelers coming to and from the wood, so the folk here have seen demon attacks, possessions, and all sorts of strange magic.”

“And you,” she adds, remembering how the women reacted when the Leszy first appeared. “They called you the pale man.”

“They consider me an omen. Of what, I do not know, since I usually come here on market days to stock up on eggs and cheese.”

“Clearly you’re an omen of an upcoming egg and cheese shortage.”

“Clearly,” he replies, deadpan. “Regardless, Kazimiera is well respected by the townspeople. She will ensure that as many of them keep quiet about tonight as possible.”

Liska thinks of the ancient czarownik, of the golden power that radiated from her and the sword appearing in her hand. “Why doesn’t she help you guard the Driada?” she asks. “Kazimiera, I mean.”

The Leszy looks away. “Because she has not the power. No one does. I forged that wood with my magic, my *soul*, and a piece of me exists in every tree and fern it grows. No one else can navigate it like I can; no one else can speak to it the way I do.” He rubs absentmindedly at a streak of blood on his cheek. “I can train apprentices to assist me, but they will never have that connection. I end and begin in the Driada, and that is how it will be for eternity. The wood must always have a warden.”

He takes a shaky breath and bends over, picking up his skull-mask from where he left it leaning against the wall. He supports himself on the bed when he attempts to get to his feet, and Liska notices the shine of barely healed wounds across his forearms.

“You’re no demon,” she says. She cannot pinpoint the exact moment she realized it. Perhaps she has known since the beginning, and perhaps it took him saving her life for her to see it. “You hunger, and you tire, and you get wounded. You’re no demon, Leszy.”

Slowly he lowers the skull onto the bed, pausing in his efforts to stand. “Not a proper one, no,” he concedes. “One must first die to become a demon, and I never have. A part of me is still mortal, though I suspect that part is rather small.”

Liska presses her lips together, contemplating him: the colorless hair, the notched antlers. *How did you become this way?* she longs to ask. But she knows he would not answer, not yet. Perhaps he never will, but there are other ways to unravel mysteries.

She moves her attention to the mask, reaching out toward it. When the Leszy does not stop her, she lets her touch rest against the bone, surprised to find the cool surface humming with magic.

“Why do you wear this, then?” Liska wonders. “Why pretend you’re not human at all?”

He closes his eyes, exhaustion washing unmoored across his features. “If I look like a monster,” he says roughly, “then no one will be surprised when I do monstrous things.”

Liska’s heart clenches. Without knowing what exactly she is doing, she moves her fingers from the skull to his face, tracing the smear of blood along his jaw. The way he is kneeling, his face is level with hers: she can make out flecks of gold in the depths of his verdant irises and the tiny mole under his right eye. Seeing him like this, her voice nearly dies in her throat, and she has to force it through.

“I don’t think you’re a monster.”

He begins to smirk bitterly, but she touches her thumb to the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t,” she repeats. “Eliasz.”

“*Oj, Liseczka.*” The words escape as a sigh, one she feels on her cheek. He brings his face closer to hers, so close their foreheads are almost touching. His lips are slightly parted, limned by the muted light. All she would have to do is lean in, tilt her chin up, and—

“What am I doing?” The Leszy jerks away, rising to his feet. His pupils are blown wide, eyes roiling with emotions she cannot begin to discern. He rakes a hand through his hair, straightens his sukmana. “I believe it is time for me to leave,” he says curtly. “This is farewell for a while, Liska Radost.”

OLD GODS

“WAIT, W-WHY?” LISKA STAMMERS. “WHERE are you going?”

The Leszy’s expression is closed off, resolute. “I intend to patrol the perimeter of the Driada and check my wards in person. I need to ensure an incident like this never happens again.”

“Then let me go with you!” Liska exclaims. “Now that I have some training, I can—”

“No.” One word like the strike of a judge’s gavel. *No*. Using more strength than necessary, he snaps off one of his antler tines, the accompanying *crack* like the snapping of bone. He murmurs a spell over it and puts it on the bedside table. “This will open a spelldoor to the Driada. You must simply touch it to the tree in the square while thinking of the manor, and it will take you to the gates. I will return in a week’s time.”

He pulls on his mask. Then he is picking up Wyrok, and he is at the door, ducking beneath the low frame and into the street. A gust of brutal wind slams it shut behind him.

Liska wavers on the edge of the bed, feverish and disoriented. What is wrong with her? How could she even *consider* kissing him? He is a seven-hundred-year-old czarownik. With *antlers*. He’s hardly even human! Yet her whole chest aches, not just from her wounds but with fresh yearning. He cannot leave her, not like this. She needs to know where they stand—that she didn’t imagine the softness of his voice or the longing in his eyes.

Outside the day has emerged from its own battle, bleak and bruised and smelling of fear. Wałkowo's roads are sticky with blood and corroded by strzygoń remains, slippery under Liska's boots as she limps toward the marketplace. The wind howls a requiem, drowning out the weeping of villagers in the streets as they collect the last of the dead. Most do not give Liska a second glance, but a few turn toward her, whispering their thanks in broken voices.

It is not difficult to find the Leszy again. His antlers tower above the crowd as he heads for the tree where they first emerged, a half-dead maple with knobby, naked branches. Around it several shops are in ruins, delicate awnings shredded and windows broken, signs splattered with blood or knocked askew. A lump forms in Liska's throat, but before she can make her presence known, someone else approaches the Leszy: Kazimiera, arriving with furious decisiveness and setting her arms on her hips. She says something to the Leszy in a low voice. Whatever the Leszy's response, it seems to agitate the elderly woman, because she snaps, "Your body is exhausted, and so is your magic. Leaving now is dangerous, Eliasz."

"What's dangerous is staying," the Leszy replies. "This wasn't some random anomaly, Kazimiera. They were *cooperating*. Demons are not capable of that, not on their own. This was Weles's doing, I am sure of it. The wood was already restless because of the girl, and he used that to his advantage." He adjusts Wyrok at his side, lays his hand on the pommel. "Still, coordinating an attack this big would have taken much of his strength. With luck, it will be weeks before he recovers. I must do this now, while he's at his weakest." He steps closer to the other czarownik. "Look after the girl."

"Look after—" Kazimiera's milky eyes narrow. "Ah. That's what this is really about, isn't it? Have you not learned yet that running away from your problems never fixes them?"

"If I recall correctly, it was I who said that to you," the Leszy notes. "You're forgetting your place, dear girl."

"Then stop being foolish!"

"Being foolish is provoking Weles. I will not make the same mistake I did with Florian."

"It's different with her," Kazimiera argues. "*She's* different."

“That does not matter.” The Leszy drops his voice until Liska can barely make it out, the edges of his words clipped and growling. “You think Weles cares? He is a petulant child who wakes from his slumber just to throw around toys and watch me scramble to pick them up. I cannot rest until this is done.”

Kazimiera purses her lips. “One day, you are going to have to face this demon of yours, Eliasz.”

He laughs, mirthless. “If that day were to come, I would fall, and the Driada along with me. Judge me as you please, Kazimiera, but I will not let one intrepid, doe-eyed girl ruin seven hundred years of stability.”

With that, he slams his hand against the maple’s trunk. It splits like an opening mouth, revealing a cluster of slender saplings and red-leafed thickets beyond. Before Liska can call out to him, he steps through the spelldoor and is gone.

Left alone, a rueful apathy falls over Liska. So the Leszy does feel something for her, and he is adamant to not feel that thing. So be it—it makes everything easier. She only needs to survive this year and get home. But ah, it hurts. There had been a moment, so close to the Leszy, where she had felt... certain. Like she could see a different path, a new way forward, a path where she would find a place for herself at the manor.

But that could never be. The Leszy keeps too many secrets, never settling, caring only for his duty. He’s made it clear that to him, Liska is just an *intrepid, doe-eyed girl*, nothing more than a distraction. And now there is this mysterious Weles—another demon, complicating matters. How powerful must he be, to bring about last night’s tragedy?

Before Liska’s thoughts can spiral further, she spots a familiar figure staggering down the street. It’s the boy she saw yesterday, all rags and lanky limbs, his straw-colored hair filthy and his troubled eyes staring at nothing. She pauses, considering the youth, then looks for Kazimiera again, only to realize the old woman is already gone. Instead, she stops an important-looking man in a sheepskin vest.

“Please, Panie, do you know that boy?” She points to the child.

The man gives a distracted shake of his head, barely looking her way. “Licho knows. You think I recognize all the children around here?”

“I only want to know where his family is.” *If they are alive.* She does not want to say it.

The man shoulders past. When he looks back on her, his eyes are dark with grief. “If he is here alone, I think you know your answer.”

Liska knots her hands at her breast, watching as the boy slumps by the ruined awning of a bakery. He stares at the dirt, expressionless. Something about him seems *off*, though she cannot put a finger on why. Her heart twists. He’s just a child—she cannot leave him here alone.

When she approaches the boy, he flinches away, skittish as a foal. He looks to be about eleven, though his haggard frame adds years to his appearance. Liska crouches in front of him, forcing a gentle smile that feels all wrong on her face; she hopes it looks more convincing than it feels.

“Hello,” she greets him softly. “What’s your name?”

The boy does not answer. His lips remain pressed together stubbornly, his gaze downcast. Beneath a coating of filth, his face is crowded with freckles.

“Can you tell me where your parents are?” she tries.

Again, silence. His eyes flick up from the dirt, then down again, like he fears Liska will turn into a strzygoń at any moment.

“Do you have anywhere to go?”

This time a shake of the head, so faint she almost misses it.

“Then why don’t you come with me?” She extends her hand. “We’ll get you something to eat.”

The boy sucks in a sharp breath. When he looks up, his eyes are the reddish brown of mahogany. His hand whips out, gripping Liska’s extended fingers as if they are a lifeline.

This time when she smiles, it feels better, almost natural. “Come on, then. I know someone who can help.”



Liska knocks tentatively on the door of Kazimiera’s hovel, but she does not wait for an answer before ushering the boy inside. The faster she can get him out of the tragedy-stricken streets, the better. To her surprise, the czarownik is home,

setting a kettle on the stove. She looks up when they enter, rubbing at her shoulder wearily.

“Ah. I was wondering where you went.” She seems to want to say more, but the boy holding Liska’s hand catches her attention. “And who is this?”

“I was hoping you would know,” Liska says. “I found him wandering the streets. He doesn’t want to speak to me.”

Kazimiera approaches, peering at the boy. With her hunched frame, she is not much taller than him, and Liska cannot reconcile her aged stature with the sword-wielding czarownik she saw last night. “He looks like one of the farmhands from the wójt’s homestead. He’s likely an orphan. It’s not uncommon for folk around here to take them in, pay them with meals for their work.” She puts a worn hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You look famished. I haven’t much, but I’ve bread and yesterday’s grochówka. Come, sit, sit, both of you.” She shepherds them to the table and busies herself in the kitchen. A snap of her fingers, and the pot of soup is boiling. Another, and she is holding a round loaf of bread in her hands.

Normally Liska would find this impressive, but now she is far too preoccupied to notice. “Kazimiera?” she asks, her voice rasping tiredly.

“Yes?”

She hesitates, knowing she is about to admit to eavesdropping. “I overheard your conversation with the Leszy, in the marketplace.”

“All of it?”

“Mostly.”

To her surprise, Kazimiera cackles. “Good. I imagine he kept it all a secret from you, didn’t he? He does that—he thinks telling people his troubles will make him vulnerable. I imagine you have questions.”

Liska looks down at her hands, interlaced in her lap—a proper, deferent posture, like Mama taught her. “Just one, really. Who is Weles?”

Kazimiera smiles knowingly, ladling thick grochówka into bowls and filling the room with the smell of peas and kielbasa and bay leaves. She sets the three bowls on the table, then cuts them all wide slices of bread and sits across from Liska.

“Let me tell you a story,” she begins, voice deepening. Her milky eyes glint mysteriously, the dramatic effect somewhat ruined by the orphan boy noisily slurping up spoonfuls of soup. “There was a child born with magic, a great and rare gift. At a young age, he was sent off from his peasant family to study beneath a czarownik, who was convinced the boy would be a prodigy. Even then, there were few of us—no more than five born in a century, they said, so to be chosen was a great honor for such a child.

“But alas, fate had its own plan. As he grew, the boy’s magic failed to progress, his connection to the in-between faint at best. His master soon disregarded him, taking another apprentice to dote upon. But the boy was not to be dissuaded. He studied day and night, devouring every scroll he could get his hands on. He became obsessed with the study of souls, learning why he was weak in magic despite his efforts. His knowledge did not go unnoticed by his fellows. They took his scrolls and notes, used them to perform the experiments he had not the magic for. He was glad to be of use, but they did not see him—only his work, work they took and claimed as their own.

“All this time, Orlica was fighting a war. More and more demons seemed to be appearing, rusalki lurking in even the smallest ponds and strzygoń hunting in city alleyways. Rogue spirits wreaked chaos, and the people, even the king, were powerless against them. Only the czarownik and their bespelled swords could kill these demons, but with such small numbers, they were quickly overwhelmed. The boy saw an opportunity. He had long been searching for ways to increase his power, and he found one in an ancient text: a pagan ritual to summon an old god and make a pact. That very night, he went to an old shrine in an even older wood and performed the summoning. No one knows what happened there, what he bargained with, or what he sacrificed, but he came back... changed.”

Liska can imagine it: the Leszy emerging from a great wilderness crowned in antlers, green eyes maddened with power.

“The next day, he stood upon an open field and summoned forth a great wood. It was magic like none had seen before, trees leaping forth from the earth every time he took a breath. They grew and grew, their magic amplified with

every sapling he summoned. And into the wood he drew the demons and spirits that plagued the land.

“The spell nearly killed him. It turned his hair white with effort and put him in a weeklong coma, but when he woke, he found himself victorious—Orlica’s savior, recognized for the first time. His fellow czarownik came to gawk and fawn, treating him as an equal. But he had paid a great price—he was bound to the wood he created. If he left for too long, his power would weaken. And if his power weakened, so would that of his wards, causing the wood to release the spirits back into Orlica. The boy had to choose: take the place he longed for among his czarownik brethren, or seize the power he had sacrificed so much to claim and take upon himself a duty no others could bear.”

“He chose duty in the end.”

Kazimiera snorts. “Please, he’s not that righteous. He chose *power*—if he could not be accepted by the others, he would simply be above them. Back then he was arrogant, demanding gifts and riches, building himself a grand manor in the wood where he hosted feasts and revelries. He played at politics, using the threat of his power to get what he wanted. He was not a good man, not for a long time. But age changed him, as did his wardenship. What was once arrogance faded into indifference, while cunning became cynicism. The Driada wore him down, gnawed at his edges until he caved to it.”

“How do you know all this, Pani?” Liska asks, awe muting her voice.

Kazimiera’s expression turns nostalgic. “When he was still human, he took an apprentice. A girl, powerful in magic, who had been turned away by every other czarownik because she was not a man.” She looks down at her hands, a fond smile pulling up her mouth. “He taught me everything I know, made me powerful enough to hold a seat on the council of our brethren. But after he forged the Driada, he grew aloof. He was lost in himself, unsure what he had become. The last time he paid a proper visit to me was two hundred years ago, to introduce me to Flor—” She cuts off, eyeing Liska with a look that says she realizes she may have said too much.

“Florian,” Liska finishes. “I know of him.”

The old woman nods. “He made Eliaz better,” she says. “Put a spark in his eye, tempered his bite. It’s a pity their time together was so short.”

“How short?”

“Three years.”

Liska suppresses a shiver. Three years, in the Leszy’s seven-hundred-year lifespan. “It’s the old god, isn’t it? The one he made a pact with. He caused Florian’s death, just like he caused the attack yesterday.”

Kazimiera looks aggrieved. “Weles... was deeply jealous of Florian. He considers Eliazs his property, you see, and is always fighting for control. Eliazs has ways to keep him subdued, but it is not always enough to keep back the fury of an old god. *Especially* when he feels slighted.”

The soup suddenly tastes like ashes. “So... what happened last night...”

“Do not think of that now,” Kazimiera says quickly. “It will do you no good.”

But it is impossible. Liska pushes the bowl away and stands, wrapping her arms around herself. No wonder the Leszy is so afraid of whatever connection has grown between them. He was afraid Weles would lash out again—and he was right.

“You said I’m different,” she whispers, clinging to that thread of hope. “How?”

“Something binds you to the wood. I’m not sure how or why, but I can sense it in you the way I sense it in Eliazs. You may have more control of it than Florian ever did. It... it respects you.”

“But why? I’m not strong, and I can’t access my magic. I—I don’t have any power at all.”

“Not on the outside, maybe. But in here”—Kazimiera taps her chest, just over her heart—“you are more powerful than you could ever fathom.”

If you knew what I’ve done, you would not be saying that, Liska wants to scream. But she keeps her mouth shut, fighting off a swell of tears.

Kazimiera misreads Liska’s reaction and crosses her arms. “Right, I’ve said too much. You need to sleep, Liska, before you reach your wit’s end. I’ll take care of our young friend here.” She lays her hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Don’t you worry.”

Liska wants to protest. *Should* protest. But everything has simply become... too much. Her thoughts are a mob of crows, a chaos of inky dark feathers and

fluttering, untamable madness. They do not settle even as she lays down, sleep gripping her with a rusalka's hands and dragging her into its depths.

In her dreams, the yellow-haired woman bleeds out at her feet, blood gushing and gushing from her throat until it is a claret lake, eddying around Liska's ankles. The woman's face sinks beneath the blood—when it reemerges, it is Marysieńka who stares, mouth open in a scream.

Choking back a sob, Liska whirls away, but her feet will not move. Ahead, the Leszy emerges from a dried-up wood, his eyes blank and empty and hands drooping at his sides. He is missing his antlers. Over him rises a monster woven of dead trees and gore, cloaked in ragged lichen that drips toward the earth. In its gaunt face, its eyes are hollows, its bottom jaw torn off and upper gums crowded with thorns instead of teeth. In each spindly hand, it holds a branch sharpened to a lethal point.

With a delighted grin, the monster raises the branches and plunges them into the Leszy's head, sending sap bursting from his scalp as he screams.

Then it comes for Liska.

MAKSIO

THE DREAM GRIPS LISKA EVEN in her waking hours, leaving her tense and rattled as she prepares to return to the Driada. Perched on a stool by the stove, the strange little boy tracks her every movement like a hawk, staring as she tucks the Leszy's antler shard into her pocket and buckles Onegdaj's sheath around her waist. When she finally turns back to him, he pins her with large brown eyes, his stare unsettling.

"You're going to stay here," Liska tells him gently. "Kazimiera will look after you."

Immediately the boy's eyes fill with tears. He leaps up from the stool, grabbing Liska's hand, and makes a sound of protest.

"You have to," she says firmly. "I'm going to the Driada, and that's no place for anyone, especially children." She tries to extract her hand, but he only grips her tighter and tugs, insistent.

Liska sweeps a rogue curl beneath a kerchief she borrowed from Kazimiera, considering. The boy has not left her side since she found him, even as she slept—she does not know if he rested in the meantime. Bringing him to a sentient manor in a spirit-wood does not seem at all like a responsible thing to do, but he is old enough to know what he wants, and this is the most lucid he has looked since she first found him.

"Listen," she says reasonably. "If you come with me, you will not be able to leave for a while, not until the Leszy returns. You will have to live in a creaky old manor, and you will be stuck inside at night, because there are monsters in the

woods. Everything there is ancient; the library comes and goes, the candles light themselves, and there is a skrzat of dubious intentions who lives in the stove. It's all rather frightening."

None of this seems to faze the boy. A heartbeat passes, and he drops Liska's hand, looking toward the door. His jaw is clenched with determination.

Liska sighs her defeat and ruffles his hair. It's a terrible idea, but she has the feeling she couldn't force him to stay if she tried. "Very well, then. But I still don't know what to call you."

No answer. The boy opens his hands and shrugs.

"Maksio," Liska suggests. "Do you like that? Until you're ready to tell me your real name."

The boy gives her the faintest grin, an eager light in his eyes. Liska cannot help but smile back, a tug of kinship softening her bruised heart.

She squeezes the boy's hand. "Then let's go together, Maksio."



There is a shrill cold in the air when they return to the marketplace, and Liska can almost see the shears of fall snipping off summer's threads earlier than usual. A scattering of leaves blows past her as she approaches the old maple, Maksio eager at her side. Kazimiera follows behind them, using a knobby branch as a walking stick.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asks, raising her voice to be heard over the keening wind. "You could still go home."

Home. It resonates like a name from infancy, well known yet long forgotten. Yes, Liska could go home—pay any traveler with a cart to take her to the next village over, and the next and the next, until she is in Stodoła once more. She would be greeted by Mama's disappointed frown and the Prawotas' watchful eyes, waiting for an opportunity to denounce her as a witch. No, she cannot return home like this. She is dangerous now, more than ever—what she did last night only proved that.

Liska shuts her eyes, squeezing out tears brought by the wind's sting. "I made a bargain, Kazimiera." She touches the fetter on her wrist. "What kind of person would I be if I did not see it through?"

“A reasonable one,” Kazimiera replies sourly. “He does not deserve you, Liska Radost.”

“Nor I him,” she replies. “But nothing is ever equal with humans, really—we give and we take, the scales ever tipping. That’s just the way of it. I am what he has, and he is what I have—there’s no point keeping score.”

A soft smile ghosts over the old woman’s face. “Then you be careful, my girl. Of him and of the wood.” She looks away, a melancholy light in her eyes. The gale whips quicksilver hair from beneath her kerchief. “Nothing lasts forever,” she says. “I am not long for this world—my magic has worn thin, so thin it can no longer keep me from aging. My story is ending, Liska. You could very well be the last of our kind.”

Liska swallows past a lump in her throat, unable to look at Kazimiera. She could be the last thread of magic in Orlica, and she intends to cut it loose. Her gaze wanders before being caught by Maksio’s, looking up. The boy’s expression is curious, analyzing. It is the same look she has seen on the Leszy when he is particularly intrigued by something, the cogs of his mind turning with theories and ideas. She does not know what to make of it, but she gives him a reassuring smile.

“Ready?”

He nods. If he is afraid, he does not show it.

Liska looks over her shoulder and raises her hand in farewell. Kazimiera returns the gesture, a thread of golden magic dancing between her fingers. Liska wonders if they will ever meet again—just in case, she memorizes Kazimiera as she sees her: ancient but powerful, standing defiant against the forces of time. Then, squaring her shoulders, she pulls out the Leszy’s antler shard and presses it against the dying maple.

As soon as she makes contact, the mottled trunk ripples and expands, a spelldoor yawning before them. On the other side is the gate to the House Under the Rowan Tree, the rusted finials and crooked bars an arm’s length away.

Liska pushes them open for Maksio as they step through, their feet leaving the blood-soaked dirt of Wałkowo and landing on the estate path. Red-rose hedges bloom rowdily around them, thorny tendrils sprawling over the flagstones. They have begun to die, but it is a slow process, beautiful, the leaf tips

curling as they brown, and singular petals catching in the breeze. At Liska's side, Maksio pauses, eyes wide as he takes in the sight.

"What do you think?" Liska asks.

Instead of answering, he releases her hand and runs ahead. He steps from one flagstone to another, hopping over mushrooms growing in the cracks in his own private game. When he reaches the garden's center where the fern flower once bloomed, he stops and looks around, unsure where to go next.

"Do you want some strawberries?" Liska gestures to the garden, where the last of the Leszy's begrudgingly given gift is still bearing fruit. "There are apples, too, and wild blueberries in the grove. You can take whatever you'd like." She eyes the darkening wood, noticing the first signs of fog creeping over the mossy earth. "There's just one rule." She stops in front of Maksio, holding his attention with as much authority as she can muster. "You must never go beyond the gate, understand? And you can't come out of the manor at night. The monsters I told you about, they're always prowling out there. But you're perfectly safe in the manor, I promise. And in the daytime, you can come out into the garden as often as you please. All right?"

Maksio nods with fervor, bouncing on his toes. Together, they approach the manor. The doors open before Liska can touch them, creaking loudly in greeting. Tension eases out of her at the familiar sound. It has barely been a day since she left, yet she feels as though it has been a decade.

Barely a day, yet enough nightmares for a lifetime.

As the sun sets, Liska focuses her attention on Maksio, keeping her thoughts stubbornly away from Wałkowo and the Leszy. The manor has servants' quarters, and that is where she gets him settled, finding old but clean linens and a duvet, and shaking off the dust as best as she can. She raids her own wardrobe for clothes and brings him ones she thinks might fit.

"My room is on the left down the hall, with the white door," she tells him as he presses a tentative hand against the mattress. It occurs to her he may have never slept on a proper bed before. After a careful moment, the boy yawns hugely and crawls into the bed, filthy clothes and all, and beams. Liska laughs softly, glad to see him smile.

“Good night, then. You can tell the candles to go out if you want, or you can leave them on. Same goes for the hearth.” She stands, brushing out her skirts. The movement makes her shoulder ache dully. “Come to me if you want anything.”

As she walks back to her chambers, a puff of smoke and the glint of white teeth alerts her to Jaga’s presence.

I have two questions, says the spirit, not bothering with hellos. One, why do you look like you were trampled by an ox, and two, why is there a strange child in the manor, who also looks like he was trampled by an ox?

Liska swallows. “There was an attack, in Wałkowo. The rusalki and strzygoń, they—” She cuts off, tears unexpectedly pricking at her eyes. How does she begin to explain? The chaos of battle, the yellow-haired woman’s death, the Leszy’s departure, the old god... she suddenly feels as though she cannot get enough air, the hallway constricting around her. She staggers against the wall, her shoulder aching in protest, and lets her weak legs cave beneath her until she is sitting on the cold hardwood.

Girl? Jaga peers from the shadows, eyeing her. Along the hall, candles in sconces shudder and flare, turning the same violet blue as Liska’s magic. Seeing the volatile effects of her powers, Liska hides her face in her hands.

Oh dear, Jaga says. There is a distant creak, and a gust of night air carries down the hall, likely from the window on the landing. Then a heavy weight settles in Liska’s lap. Jaga has turned herself into a scruffy sheepdog, as sooty gray as her cat form.

Liska releases a shuddering breath, burying her hands in Jaga’s curly fur. “How...?”

I eat well, says the spirit, self-satisfied.

Liska says no more, and neither does Jaga, all questions and explanations forgotten. They sit like that for a long time, until the candles return to their usual yellow and Liska’s breathing comes easily once more. Only then does Liska rise and make her way to her room.

Jaga stays with her through the night, curled over Liska’s feet. When the nightmares inevitably come, Liska hugs her as she trembles.

By dawn, the skrzat has vanished again.



A week without the Leszy is a blessing. A week without the Leszy is agony. Liska is haunted by their parting moments, by his curt goodbye and his grim words to Kazimiera: *I will not let one intrepid, doe-eyed girl ruin seven hundred years of stability.*

So be it, she decides. Whatever strange bond has formed between them, let it die. It has already brought the wrath of a greater demon upon one village—how long until Stodoła is in danger? No, she cannot risk her home. She needs to be ready to protect it, whatever comes.

She is running out of time to free her magic.

From the kitchen window, she watches a gray-bellied jay take flight from one of the plum trees. She has finished putting away dried fruits and mushrooms, already planning for the winter months. Maksio, who until then has been quietly assisting Liska in her work, takes supreme interest in trying to lure Jaga out from her sleeping place in the oven.

Liska tunes out Jaga's cursing as she opens the *Czarologia*, finding the spells she has read over so many times but never been able to cast. Eventually she settles on the regeneration spell the Leszy asked her to perform weeks ago. There are a few apples on the table, left in a porcelain bowl painted in bright wycinanki patterns, that are beginning to look wrinkly. Liska pulls out the worst offender, sets it in front of herself, and focuses.

The effect is almost immediate. Her magic rises, eager, spiraling, to her skin. The feeling is ever so familiar, ever so intimate. Just like in Wałkowo, just like when Tata died, just like in the Prawotas' barn... Bile burns her throat. She fights the memories back, but all she can see are tendrils of ice, crumbling roofs, and horror, always horror, in the end. How can she unleash this? *Focus, Liska.* She fixes her eyes on the apple. *Focus.*

As sudden as the snap of fingers, the in-between unravels around her, the apple's soul appearing as a faint, colorless spark that dims as it rots. According to the *Czarologia*, all she must do is visualize rebirth and speak a command. Simple. A breath, in, out. In her mind, she holds the image of a blossom unfurling.

"Restore," she commands, reading from the *Czarologia*.

But as the spell leaves her lips, she remembers the devastation in Walkowo. Her concentration collapses, stomach roiling, but it is too late—magic explodes from within her, enveloping the apple in a burst of blue light. When it dissipates, she finds nothing left over but a needle-thin, half-rotted core.

Liska drops her head into her arms, squeezing her eyes shut and biting back a growl. She is jerked out of her hopelessness by a startled feline shriek, as Maksio finally gives up and grabs Jaga out of the oven, hugging her to his chest. He grins triumphantly, and Jaga, stiff in his arms, tolerates the affection with bruised dignity.

The sight is so ridiculous that Liska laughs, chest loosening. Reassembling her shattered resolve, she picks up the rotten apple, shoves the window open, and tosses it into the garden.



Over the next few days, Liska continues trying small spells, forcing herself through nausea and the rattling of her heart, trying to ignore her aversion to magic that seems to grow with every attempt. Now that she has freed it once, it does seem easier to trigger, but it still comes in wild, uncontrolled bursts. Most times she balks before even reciting the spell, too rattled to pull through. Twice she gets frustrated enough to ignite her powers, and both times it goes awry: once a plate turns to dust instead of changing color, and once she freezes the stove instead of lighting it—it spends a full day thawing. By the end of the week, she is beginning to doubt her abilities entirely.

True to his word, the Leszy returns exactly seven days after their parting. It is late into the night, the Driada recovering from a violent storm, and Liska and Maksio are playing chess at the kitchen table while Jaga watches, offering the occasional—rather useless, because board games seem to be outside of a spirit's understanding—advice. The doors open and close quietly, barely audible over Maksio's gleeful laugh as he wins yet another round. A second later, the Leszy walks into the kitchen.

He looks drained. His eyes are dark, bruised circles stark underneath, and his damp hair is slicked back with rainwater. He must have cut it on the journey,

because it frames his face in short, uneven waves. His sukmana is soaked through, and the hem, which reaches past his knees, drips a trail across the floor.

Liska does not know why, but elation fills her at the sight of him. “Leszy!” she exclaims.

“Good evening,” he greets her, sounding mildly perplexed. He blinks tired eyes, his stare unfocused for a moment before he notices Maksio. “What...?”

Liska smiles encouragingly. “This is Maksio. He’s from Wałkowo.”

“From...? You’re not serious.” Her stomach sinks at the hollow dismay in his voice. “You did not... Liska, you brought a *child* here?” He runs a despairing hand over his face. “What were you thinking? Do you know how dangerous—”

“Yes, I do.” Liska finds herself matching her own tone to the Leszy’s, low and confrontational. “I know very well. But he had nowhere else to go.”

“What about his *home*?”

“He doesn’t have one. Kazimiera thinks he was an orphan hired as a farmhand.”

“There are orphanages....”

“The manor is better than that!”

“Liska.” He opens his palms, infuriatingly calm. “Liska, you know this cannot happen.”

Looking away pointedly, Liska nudges Maksio’s arm. “Go to your room, all right? The Leszy and I need to talk alone.”

The boy gives her a desperate look, clasping his fingers on her sleeve.

“You’ll be fine,” she promises him. “He’ll understand, you’ll see.”

Reluctantly, Maksio sets down the pawn he was holding and slides from the chair. Jaga hops off the table and pads after him into the hall. Liska and the Leszy wait until their footsteps have receded, tension blistering the air between them. When the Leszy breaks the silence, his words are merciless.

“I’m taking him back to the town tomorrow.”

“No.” Liska stands, sending the pawns rattling on the chessboard. “Leszy, you saw him. He doesn’t want to go back.”

“It doesn’t matter what he wants. He’s a child. He has no idea what he has gotten himself into, and I will not be responsible for—” *For another life.* The words crackle in the air, unspoken.

“It’s the old god, isn’t it? Weles. Kazimiera told me about him.” His expression does not change—if he is angered by her knowledge, he does not show it. “She said you made a pact with it to create the Driada, and now you’re scared it will hurt us.”

“You know nothing about that.”

“Not from you, certainly,” she bites out. “But it doesn’t matter. As soon as I have my magic back, we can defeat him.”

He shakes his head. “There is no *we*, Liska. There cannot be.” Sorrow flickers across his expression. “I’m sorry. The boy goes back tomorrow. I will try to find a good place to take him—”

“I said no.” Behind her rib cage, her magic begins to stir.

“You have no say in this matter, dear fox. Not in this case, not when it concerns my manor.”

She digs her nails into her palms. “Your manor?” Her magic unfurls its wings. “*Your* manor?” In her mind’s eye, she can sense the manor’s spirit flickering in the in-between, a warm, benevolent entity, primeval and languid. Instinctively Liska reaches for it. Before she realizes what she is doing, her magic is flowing through the floorboards, connecting with that great presence beneath her feet.

The House Under the Rowan Tree *roars*.

THE GIRL WHO BLED IN THE MOONLIGHT

THE KITCHEN CABINETS SLAM OPEN and shut. The candles flicker; the stove spits tall blue flames. On the table, the chessboard pawns explode into splinters. The porcelain teacups arranged on the shelves shatter one after another, the sound like a scale played on bells.

“Liska,” the Leszy says, careful.

Another teacup explodes.

“Liska!” He crosses the room, shoving the table aside to grasp Liska’s shoulders. “Stop this.”

Stumbling back, Liska clutches at her chest. She grapples with her breathing, her brow tight with effort as she cuts off the flow of magic. The struggle is such that it leaves her swaying on her feet. As she rights herself, all she can see is carnage—glass on the ground, splinters on the table, scorch marks over the stove. An acrid taste fills her mouth. Whirling on her heel, she turns to the sink and retches.

When she is done, she wipes her mouth on her sleeve and braces her hands on either side of the sink, staring unseeing through the window. She cannot look at the Leszy—she does not have to. She knows he is watching her with either pity, horror, or both.

“Liska.” Soft, helpless. “Liska, I know you mean well. It’s... This wood has taken everything from me. Everything. I do not wish to risk more lives than

necessary. I..." His voice fades into a tired sigh. "Very well, he can stay. But at the first sign of danger, I am taking him back to Orlica. Yes?"

Somehow the concession makes her feel worse. "No, you were right. He's not safe here, not with me. Just look at what I've done."

"You need practice."

"I *have* practiced. Over and over and over again, and it's hopeless." Liska whirls on him with such speed that he looks stricken. "And what does it matter, anyway? I only meant to use my magic to help you bring order back to the wood. But all this... the demon attacks, Weles, it's *because of me*. So why don't you just take it?" She digs her fingers into her chest, over her heart, as if she could claw it out. "Do us all a favor and take this *thing* out of me."

He presses his lips together. "That's not—"

"Please." Desperation makes her irrational, turning every emotion up like the wick of an oil lamp. She grabs his shirt, and for half a moment, she wants to press her face into his chest, to seek comfort in his touch. "Please."

His hands twitch, as if to pull her toward him—instead, he wraps slender fingers around her wrists, prying her off. "Liska..."

A sob bursts from her lips. She shoves him away, turning. Tears are brimming in her eyes, fogging her vision, and shame burns her cheeks.

She rushes out of the kitchen before the tears can come. She does not look where she is going, not really. The dark, polished floorboards flash by beneath her feet. Somehow, somehow, she finds herself at the star-painted door to the library; it opens before she can touch it. She rushes inside, into the enchanted woodland, wishing she could drown in the pool of moonlight cascading through the vast windows.

The door clicks shut behind her. Breathing hard, Liska curls up on the suspended swing, pulling her knees up to her chest and fighting to swallow back more tears. Despair sharpens its claws on her sternum, squeezes tight her chest, and she can no longer identify the source of the feeling. It simply consumes her, growing like a wildfire, turning all that is verdant to nothing but ashes.

The library door creaks open, and she is no longer alone. She jerks her chin up and hastily wipes at tears, expecting to see Jaga again. But no, it is the Leszy, stepping quietly into the room and closing the door behind him. Ghostly in the

desaturated light, his expression is one of barely concealed longing as his eyes sweep the library, drinking in the sight like a beggar given coin.

“This was Florian’s favorite place,” he says quietly. “After he died, I could not bear to set foot in it. He loved books, you know, especially the fairy tales. You are not much like him, but you do have that in common.”

When Liska does not respond, he approaches, perching warily at the opposite end of the swing. “Believe it or not, I was not always this terrible with words,” he says. “The truth is, my dear fox, that I am a terrible coward. I wish only to make things easy on myself, but I did not take into consideration how you—or the boy—might feel. I am here to apologize, and to offer you a new bargain.”

A fresh tear rolls down her cheek. She wipes it away—it glimmers, crystalline, on her fingertips.

The Leszy averts his gaze awkwardly. “I have an idea as to what happened to your magic, and I suspect you do too. It has to do with that white streak in your hair.” He waves a hand toward it. “I never pried, because I thought I could free your magic on my own, but I failed. I *hate* failing. So this is my bargain: you tell me about the day your magic disappeared, and I will try to free it one last time. If I do not succeed, then I will grant you your wish.”

“I...” Liska leans her chin on her knees. The events of that day... she has never spoken them aloud. She fears what will happen if she lets them leave her memory. Her sins are demons that demand blood sacrifice, and she knows that to summon them, she must bleed herself dry.

So she draws a knife and aims at her heart.

“I killed a man, Leszy,” she whispers.

Guilt cuts through her, a blade in her chest, agonizing and defiling. It is not a swift injury, no; it is slow and meticulous—the blade descends, inch by inch, flaying her open, exposing her lungs and heart and the glint of her rib cage, displaying all the ugliness she has been hiding away. The butterflies are there too, wings blackened like wilting petals: weapons of the crime, but not the perpetrators. No, that is her; it has always been her.

She set out to sow death, and death is what she grew.

Now she reaps the consequences.

“It all started with *him*,” she says quietly. “Tomasz Prawota, my cousin’s husband.”

RED CLOVER

THE MEMORIES MARCH IN LIKE an army, conquering Liska with ease. All she has to do is close her eyes, and she is back in Stodoła. It is a week after Marysieńka's wedding, and she is visiting her cousin's home. They sit over a fresh pan of szarlotka while steam drifts lazily from a pot of tea, and Marysieńka is telling her a piece of gossip she overheard at the inn. The door opens, and Tomasz is there, long-necked and thin-faced, with his meager mustache and thunderous expression.

"Why is she here, Maryś?" he demands. He says "she" like Liska is a mouse who has been caught stealing grain, and Marysieńka is about to let her go. "We talked about this."

"And I told you that she is my cousin, my friend, and that is more important than your family's superstition."

Tomasz's eyes flash, his hand twitching at his side. Liska puts down the teacup she is holding, sensing an argument growing. "I'm sorry," she says quickly. "I didn't mean to cause trouble. I was about to leave anyway." She gets to her feet, waves to Marysieńka, and slips out of the room. She does not stop walking until she is out the front door, the wind whipping her skirt around her ankles. She should leave, she knows she should, but she cannot help it. Curiosity gets the better of her—she pauses by the side of the house where the window is cracked open, crouches against the wall, and listens.

"Speak to her if you must, Maryś, but for God's sake, do not bring her into our home." Tomasz's reedy voice is curt with anger. "She will taint this house

with her presence.”

“Tomasz, please,” Marysieńka says. “Your mother’s superstition has gone to your head. I know Liska better than anyone, and I can tell you she is kind and good and probably the most normal of us all. Everyone who knows her will tell you the same.”

“Yet I *saw* it, Maryś.” Liska’s heart feels like it has slammed into her trachea, cutting off her air. “When we were children. My mother had a cold, and Pani Radost came to bring her medicine. She brought Liska with her to watch. While Liska was there, she noticed one of our old shepherd dogs limping. It had been like that for a week, the stupid animal—Father was considering shooting it. Liska kept following it around the barn, so I went after her to tell her to leave it be. That’s when I saw it, Maryś. She was touching the dog’s forehead, and she was glowing blue.”

“‘Glowing blue.’ Tomasz, do you know how that sounds?”

But he is telling the truth. Liska remembers that dog—remembers that it had torn a nail chasing a hare, and that infection had set in. She had wanted to help the creature, but Mama had snapped that they did not have the time and had practically dragged her distraught daughter home. Liska hadn’t seen Tomasz watching her—she hadn’t known. And the dog... she never did find out what happened to it.

“I saw it with my own eyes, Maryś,” Tomasz insists.

“Tomasz,” Marysieńka says reasonably, “you were a boy. You could have seen anything.”

“Listen to me, woman,” Tomasz says, low and with authority. “I didn’t imagine what I saw. If you don’t believe me, then believe my mother. She has sensed an evil presence in your cousin, and sooner or later it will reveal itself.”

“Tomasz, please,” Marysieńka says desperately. “Enough of this. I understand you saw something, but I trust my cousin.”

Dear Marysieńka, Liska thinks mournfully, if only you knew.



Despite Marysieńka’s defense, something changes between them after that day. It is as though the ground has shifted, and suddenly they are standing at

different sides of a chasm, unsure how to cross it. Where once, Liska meeting Marysieńka in the streets was a hazard—they were sure to talk for hours, forgetting whatever task they were meant to be doing—now Marysieńka only greets her with a mild smile and a “good day” before continuing on her way. Liska begins to worry, but she cannot seem to catch her cousin alone, not even long enough to ask her if she is all right.

The next time they see each other, it is Marysieńka who comes to Liska. She runs to her after Sunday Mass, jostling poor old Pani Jankowa in her hurry. “Sorry!” she calls over her shoulder before grabbing Liska’s wrist and pulling her to the side of the chapel, beneath the shade of a tree.

“Thank God,” Maryś pants. “I thought I would never be able to escape him.”

Liska furrows her brow, hooking her arm through Marysieńka’s as she has always done. “What do you mean?”

“Tomasz has been trying to stop me from seeing you. He seems to think there are demons prowling around every corner of this village. I know he’s worried for me, but...”

“That’s ridiculous,” Liska protests. “You’re not his servant, you’re his wife.”

“I’m his wife,” Marysieńka agrees, a strained look in her brown eyes. “Which means I should be obedient. But I just... I needed to see you, Liska. Tomasz drives me mad sometimes. If I go somewhere and I do not come home swiftly enough, he gets angry with me. If I do too much work, he gets angry with me. If I do not eat enough, he gets angry with me.”

Liska’s stomach twists. “He hasn’t hurt you, has he?”

Marysieńka wearied expression turns aghast. “No. No, Liska, it’s not like that. He’s not *bad*. He only gets angry because he worries. He hardly even raises his voice when it happens, but I can see it in his eyes.”

Liska takes Marysieńka’s hands. “Listen, Maryś, if anything happens—”

“There you are!”

Before she can finish, Tomasz is there, storming toward them. The muted sun deepens the shadows under his eyes and the edges of his scowl. “Get away from her,” he growls to Liska.

“Tomasz, please.” Marysieńka throws an arm out in front of Liska protectively. “Don’t do this again.” Her eyes are fiery bright, just like they were

on the pasture when they were girls.

“She’s colluding with the devil.” Foamy spittle gathers at the corners of Tomasz’s mouth. “She is trying to lead you astray.”

“I told you, I cannot believe that.”

“Woman, would you listen to reason?”

“I’m not hearing any,” Marysieńka exclaims. “You’re just jealous that sometimes I want to spend time with her and not you.”

“You—” Tomasz raises his hand to slap Marysieńka. Maryś flinches back, but he stays his hand. His jaw is tense, his eyes glaring only at Liska, as if to say, *Look what you almost made me do*. Finally he sighs, dropping his hand.

“She’s your friend,” he says, quieting. “I see that.” He takes Marysieńka by the shoulders, steers her away from Liska. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps I’m the one doing something wrong. I’m only trying to protect you, Maryś, truly.”

Marysieńka speaks up in assurance, but he is not paying attention. For as long as he is within view, his eyes do not leave Liska’s face, and she knows she has made an enemy.



Which is why, when Tomasz Prawota knocks on her door two weeks later, she nearly faints in shock.

“Good day?” she manages, wiping her hands nervously on her apron.

“Good day.” Her cousin’s husband steps from foot to foot. “I—well, we—need your help.”

Liska is already sweating. “My... help.”

“The cow,” he says. “She’s sick.”

“Ah,” she replies. Tomasz Prawota may hate her, but he cannot deny she is useful. And so Liska finds herself in the Prawotas’ barn at noon, stepping into the stall of their plump milk cow. Straw rustles under her feet, releasing the stench of manure as she surveys the animal.

“She does look to be slightly bloated,” Liska comments, noting the cow’s distended abdomen. The cow gives her a wary stare, jaw working. There is a curtain of thick white slobber dripping from her lips, Tomasz’s primary source of concern.

“What’s wrong with her?” Tomasz demands, a tremor of genuine concern in his voice. Liska understands his worry—cattle are expensive, and losing a good milk cow is a blow few can afford.

“I cannot be certain,” Liska says. “But it looks like she ate something poisonous. Has she been fed anything new or unusual lately?”

“Marysieńka looks after her more often than I,” Tomasz says. “She will know. She’s cooking dinner now, but I will go ask.” He turns and ducks out of the barn, leaving Liska alone with the cow.

“Hello,” she greets it, far more at ease now that Tomasz is gone. The cow seems placid enough, so she pats the animal’s flank, earning an irritated glare. “If only you could tell me what’s wrong—then we could solve this quickly, and I could get out of here. I cannot stand that man, can you?” Magic expands within her, brushing at the edges of her rib cage encouragingly. It calls to her as it always does: *Use me, use me, use me.*

She looks over her shoulder through the barn door. Tomasz is gone—there is no one. She has done this a thousand times before—it is no more than a swift flash of blue light, barely visible if she cups her palms just right. Besides, the chances that Tomasz will be able to find out what exactly harmed the cow are low. If she was poisoned on the pasture, it could still be there, and it could poison the rest of the livestock. No, this will be easier, safer.

Liska presses her palm to the cow’s head and releases her magic. As always, what greets her is an uncontrolled rush of feelings, tumbling over one another like rocks down a hillside. She has done it enough times now that she knows to reach out, grasp the most potent feeling, and hold it. Often it comes to her only as a sensation—fear, or pain. This time, however, the feeling is followed by a brief memory.

Excitement, as Tomasz loads an armful of fresh clover into her manger. Among the pink-headed flowers, some of the leaves are spotted black, but she eats them regardless.

Blackened clover, Liska realizes. That explains the drooling. It’s not deadly, thankfully, but Tomasz should know better than to...

Oh.

The moment it dawns on Liska, it is too late. The door slams open, and Tomasz barges into the barn. The cow spooks, backing into a corner as he storms toward Liska.

“I knew it,” he spits. He is holding a crucifix in one hand, the other reaching for the front of her shirt. “*Witch.*”

“Tomasz, wait!” Marysieńka tries to run after him, but the cow kicks out agitatedly, forcing her to stop. Liska backs away as Tomasz advances.

“Do you believe me now?” he hisses to Marysieńka. “Now that you have seen it with your own eyes?”

“We don’t know what we saw!” Marysieńka argues, but she looks uncertain. When her eyes meet Liska’s, they are frightened. Liska’s heart thunders in her chest; she is pressed up against the manger with nowhere to go, Tomasz bearing down on her like death itself.

“You did this on purpose?” Liska whispers, digging her fingertips into the manger. She is struck less by Tomasz’s ruse and more by the fact that he poisoned his own animal to do it.

“It was necessary,” Tomasz snaps. “Now don’t fight, and don’t try hexing me or any other nonsense. Come quietly to the wójt, and we will let the law decide what you are guilty of and if...”

His voice fades. Everything fades, in the face of Liska’s panic, to the earthshaking war drum of her heart, pounding out the rhythm of *he knows he knows he knows*. It’s all over, she cannot breathe, it is over. If Tomasz reveals her secret with Marysieńka as witness, she could be run out of town, or worse, imprisoned. And if she is not—if, by some miracle, the wójt is lenient, she will still be an outcast. No one will ever look at her the same; no one will ever trust her again.

There is only one thing she can do. Rely on the curse that has lain curled up inside her since birth, release the magic she has been suppressing. *Use me use me use me*, it whispers seductively. Liska is all panic; she is melting from it, she is burning from it, and she cannot see another way out.

He knows, he knows, he knows. Use me, use me, use me.

Her mind reaches out, grabs a great something. Blue light bursts from her chest.

“*Stop him,*” she begs.



“There was a tree outside the barn,” Liska whispers faintly. “A great old linden. Stood there for over a hundred years, I’m told. It collapsed onto the barn, and it—and *I*—killed Tomasz Prawota.”



She can see it clearly now: Marysieńka screaming, barely avoiding the falling tree as it caves in the wall. Tomasz lying in the rubble, bleeding from his temple. Marysieńka staring at the spectral butterflies that silhouette Liska’s hands, beautiful features contorted in horror.

“Witch,” she whispers numbly. Then she rushes to her Tomasz’s side, presses her ear to his chest. Realization dawns on her—realization that her husband is *dead*—and she drops in a faint.

It all breaks into pieces after that. One shard is Mama, arriving at the scene to tend to Marysieńka. Another is Mama’s furious countenance as she grabs Liska by the arm, hauls her into their house, and demands, “What have you done?”

When Liska cannot answer, Mama lowers her voice. “She remembers everything, Liska, even your magic. It is fortunate that I came when I did—I was able to convince her parents that she’s delusional from a head injury.”

Liska wrings her hands, unable to meet her mother’s frosty eyes. “Will she be all right?”

“Marysieńka, yes. As for you, we can only hope.”

Recounting all this to the Leszy, she feels as though she is underwater, her voice muffled and far away. She keeps blinking back tears, but the flow is endless, and she wonders if they will drown her. When she is done, the Leszy clears his throat delicately.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“What for? This isn’t like what happened to my father. There is nowhere else you can lay the blame.” She wrings her hands. “I *wanted* that. Don’t you see, Leszy? I’m a monster.”

“You spent your life under a growing pressure, Liska. Even the strongest person would crack after so many years.”

Her breath stutters. How can he be so calm? “People are dead!”

“They are,” he agrees. “But that is the nature of the world. Things die, and new things are born.” He pulls a dry rowanberry out of his pocket, toying with it as he speaks. “Your magic is a part of you—that is also nature. Getting rid of it will not change the past, and it will not bring you relief.”

Liska knows he is looking at her, gauging her response, but she goes on staring at the berry in his hand. She is cracking, fissuring like fragile porcelain, and if she speaks, she might shatter.

“There is a thing we do,” the Leszy says, “where we rearrange ourselves, cutting off pieces here and there to fit a mold that was never meant for us. I...” He tosses the berry, catches it. “I know something of that. But becoming the Driada’s warden taught me one thing: if the world has not prepared a place for you, you must take up a hammer and chisel and carve one out for yourself.”

She wraps her arms around herself. “I’m not brave enough for that.”

“You are so very brave, Liska,” he says. “Braver than you know. Infuriatingly so, in fact. Just look at what you’ve done to me—turned me soft despite all my grand efforts to resist your relentless charm.”

She nearly smiles, nearly, and the Leszy notices. He brushes a knuckle under her chin, tilting it up until she meets his eyes. His next words are stitches—not enough to heal a wound, but enough to begin the process.

“You are not a monster, Liska Radost. You are sunlight, and you breathe life into everything you touch.”

She shakes her head, mute denial that no longer holds any weight. The swelling of her chest threatens another deluge of tears, and she finds herself reaching for the Leszy’s hand, grasping it tightly in an attempt to find anchorage. He endures it for a moment before turning his palm under hers, pressing the rowanberry into her fingers.

“Now for my part of the bargain,” he says lightly. “I think you know what to do.”

She does. Rising in her chest, filling the cradle of her rib cage, is a gently fluttering power that she has not felt for months. Strangely, the return of her

magic calms her, as though she has been fissuring slowly over time and has woken to find the cracks repaired.

“How did you know?” she whispers, pressing a hand to her chest.

“I told you: the soul and the mind are intertwined. Sometimes if you bury a part of one, you bury a part of the other.”

All this time, she has been trying not to think of what happened that day, repressing every thought of her mistakes and Marysieńka. And with it, she has been pushing away the one thing she blames for her pain.

Could it really be that simple?

She holds the rowanberry appraisingly, raising her fingers so it rolls into the middle of her palm. The *Czarologia*'s restoration spell slips into her mind, as if it has been waiting for this moment. Magic rattles at her bones, eager, *too* eager. Her breathing quickens. She thinks of the apple core, thin and rotted on the table. She thinks of thorns closing around Tata's wrist. She thinks of vines of ice whipping across the Wałkowo square; she—

The Leszy presses his lips to her forehead.

In her shock, Liska's thoughts go still. She blinks up at the Leszy—they are nearly nose to nose now, his piercing green gaze holding hers with unwavering trust. An easy smile, a smile of certainty, curves his lips. He is not afraid.

She has nothing to fear.

She takes a deep breath, filling her lungs until they ache, and exhales the spell.

“Restore.”

Blue light haloes her hands, swirling in a mesmerizing kaleidoscope, taking the shape of a butterfly's wings. Liska holds her breath as the berry's surface smooths out, red color seeping into its skin. A second passes. Another. The berry remains ripe—Liska's magic begins to fade. Relief floods through her, along with an unexpected spark of pride.

She's done it. She cast a spell, intentionally, properly.

She cast a spell, and it did not bring disaster.

“That felt... good,” she says with amazement. “I'd forgotten it could feel that way.”

“It's a part of you,” the Leszy reminds her. “It *is* good.” He is smiling, a true smile that shows the dimples in his cheeks. Liska resists the urge to touch them,

folding her hands together instead. Her palms still tingle from the spell.

“What now?” she asks, feeling like the world is shifting beneath her feet.

The Leszy leans back, smile morphing into a wolfish grin. Overhead, the library’s disembodied lights glow warmly, bounding along bookshelves and slipping between branches.

“Now, my dear not-so-clever fox,” says the wood-demon, “the fun begins.”

THE LESZY'S APPRENTICE

AS IT TURNS OUT, DEMONS have a very skewed concept of the word “fun.”

The next day, Liska’s training begins. At first it is simple things, basic spells for reviving flowers or conjuring light or summoning Onegdaj from another room. It takes time, but once she can accomplish them with a moderate degree of competency, the Leszy takes her out into the Driada for the first time.

They do not go far, merely down the cobblestone path to the spelldoor tree, where the Leszy explains that only the oldest trees have strong enough souls to open spelldoors. He shows the spell to Liska, then watches with his arms crossed as she attempts it over and over again. She returns to the manor that night without success but burning with newfound determination.

In the following weeks, they trek through much of the Driada as the Leszy shows her each of his warded paths and the landmarks he uses to orient himself. At first it frightens Liska—the contorted and bent trees, the dense mist reaching for them with shrouding fingers, the paths that lead to nowhere, and the erratic, maddening mazes of briars. But the more often she plunges into the depths, the more she learns its patterns and tricks, and the more fear morphs into a wary, mutual respect.

In her mind, she etches a map of the ever-changing wilderness: there the copse of trees with human eyes, there a twinkling waterfall shattering the Driada’s river, there the twin pines where she first met a rusalka. She learns to recognize the cackle of hunting strzygoń, and the guttural roar of a hoofed, curl-

horned bies, and the howl of a licho—a real, one-eyed licho, like the ones from myth—as it weaves through the trees.

With every week that passes, autumn tightens its grip on the world, and Liska finds herself embracing her role as the Leszy's apprentice.

Unlike Liska, Maksio adjusts to life in a spirit-wood with ease. Though he still does not speak—and Liska decides not to push him on the matter—staying at the manor seems to liven him up. He is everywhere and nowhere, often not where he should be: catching spiders and stowing them in jars, sneaking into the larder to steal strawberry preserves, playing in puddles of rainwater in the garden. His curiosity is insatiable, and she is barely surprised when the Leszy decides to teach the boy to read and write, something Maksio takes to impressively fast.

“Those two are frighteningly alike,” Liska notes to Jaga one night, watching Maksio write a paragraph from the *Czarologia* from memory and present it proudly to the Leszy. “I don't know if I should be glad or worried.”

Worried, Jaga replies. *Definitely worried*.

But no matter how bright the days, Liska's nights are always merciless. In them await nightmares, falling one over the other like dominoes. Sometimes she sees Tomasz's death, sometimes the massacre in Wałkowo; sometimes she runs through a never-ending Driada pursued by an unseen foe. She wakes coated in sweat, seconds from screaming, praying that no one hears her thrashing fitfully in the covers.

Tonight is one such night.

In the dream, it is a sweltering summer day, and Liska stands before a grave. She did not attend Tomasz's funeral—she was not invited. Instead, she has come in the aftermath, to crouch before the elongated mound of dirt and the wooden cross placed at the head, to weep her guilt and regret into the silent soil.

A shadow falls over Liska. Lost in herself, she didn't hear Marysieńka approach. Clad in black and silhouetted by the golden sun, Liska's cousin reminds her of the mythical południca: a demon disguised as a beautiful maiden who comes at noon to hunt farmers in fields. Only unlike a południca, Marysieńka does not wield a sickle—just her grief, smeared like blood across her face and brutal as any sword.

“Maryś...” Liska trails off, unable to find the words.

“I know what you are,” Marysieńka says, voice low. “I remember. Your mother says it was a delusion, but I know it wasn’t. The Prawotas suspect you too. They are talking about it to everyone, saying you are a witch.”

Liska clenches her shawl with one hand. She is abruptly and acutely afraid. “Did you tell them what you know?”

“No,” Marysieńka says. “It is the last kindness I can offer you, for the sake of our friendship.” She pauses, and Liska can feel the anger building inside her cousin until she half bursts out, “I can’t believe Tomasz was right about you. You lied to me all our lives, pretending to be normal, but all this time you’ve had magic, and you’ve been *using* it. How am I supposed to know you haven’t enchanted me somehow? How can I know our friendship was even real?”

Her voice drips with raw betrayal, offset by a trembling edge of fear. She looks everywhere but at Liska, the tears in her eyes shining in the sunlight. “You know, it all makes sense now. All those things you know about demons, they weren’t from stories. You’ve been talking to them, haven’t you?”

Liska looks down at her hands. She cannot deny it, not when she spent her childhood chatting with house-spirits and fighting to hide accidental outbursts of magic. “I tried to stop, Maryś, I swear I did, but—”

“But you couldn’t help yourself, could you? Of course not.” She laughs bitterly. “You need to leave, Liska. People like you don’t belong among people like us, especially not near the spirit-wood. Leave, and *return to your rightful place.*” Her voice changes suddenly, warping into a guttural snarl. “*This is where you are meant to be.*”

Liska turns, but it is too late—talons seize her jaw, forcing her head around until she is face-to-face with the bared teeth of a strzygoń. It yanks her forward into an embrace, holding her close as it reeks of death and decay. Its arms around her tighten and tighten and tighten and—



“Liska!”

She jolts upright, nearly smashing her forehead against the Leszy’s chin. He rears back, catching himself on the headboard before reaching out to grab

Liska's shoulder, steadying her. She nearly pushes him away, knowing how she must look: her nightgown plastered to her skin with sweat, her breath coming in wheezing gasps.

"God," Liska pants.

"Not quite," the Leszy says, watching her carefully. "But it's still a better compliment than screaming the moment you see me."

She might have rolled her eyes if she wasn't still trembling. Marysieńka hadn't transformed into a strzygoń that day, she reminds herself. She'd simply left, walking away across the churchyard, glancing back only once when she heard Liska sob.

Liska rubs her face, trying to compose herself. "I didn't wake Maksio, did I?"

To her relief, he shakes his head. "I don't think so." He is still holding her shoulder, his thumb rubbing back and forth rhythmically. He becomes aware of it the same moment she does and pulls his hand away, shifting to the foot of the bed. "Nightmares?"

She bites her lip. "They've gotten worse lately."

"Unsurprising, considering what you saw in Wałkowo." He pauses, remembering something. "I have a decoction that would help. I can bring you some tonight." She must look skeptical, because he adds, "It's mostly herbs, with a simple sleeping spell for good measure. It works, I can promise you that much."

"Thank you," Liska says, contemplating the hidden revelation in his words. Why would the Leszy have such a thing, if not to treat his own nightmares? She doesn't know why it surprises her—perhaps because he is always so measured, even in the face of horror.

She braves a glance at him, proud features gilded by firelight, moonlight squeezing through the Driada's canopy to play across his hair. He looks back, eyebrows tilting upward, perhaps realizing he has betrayed a rare weakness, perhaps having the same horrifying, cheek-heating realization as Liska: that it is night, and they are together, and that the bed beneath them is large enough for two.

Blessedly, before either of them can say—or do—anything foolish, a sentinel-moth comes soaring into the room and claims the Leszy's attention. Like before,

the delicate creature melts into his skin, making his eyes turn white. His eyes then clear, and he lurches to his feet.

“What is it?” Liska says, sitting up.

“Trouble,” he says. Magic flares in his hand, expanding until his skull-mask appears. “I must go.”

He turns and rushes from the room.

Liska scrambles to her feet. Her hair falls into her eyes, her fingers fumble, but by some miracle she manages to pull on her skirt and a blouse, shrugging on her gorset and lacing it as she runs. Maksio peers out of his room, startled by the commotion, but she motions at him to stay put.

Outside, midnight covers the world in a swath of the deepest blue, the Driada trees like talons tearing through the fabric. Quicksilver moonlight shines through the canopy, and mist swirls across the courtyard, parting around Liska’s feet as she runs.

The Leszy is nearly out of sight. He has turned into a stag again, and his pelt is stark against the night, an errant streak of white dripped by the hand of a clumsy painter. He seems about to break into a gallop, but Liska calls out to him.

“Leszy!”

He does not stop moving, but his eyes glint with wild fervor as he looks over his shoulder.

“If you are coming, then keep up.”

She nearly trips, startled that he didn’t tell her to go back. “What is it this time?”

“Caravan of performers from Litven, probably on their way to the autumn festival in Aniołów.” He pauses briefly, ducking his head for Liska to scramble onto his back. “It’s a full moon, so the ogniki are especially active.”

Ogniki, spirits that manifest as glowing lights—Liska was warned about them many times as a child. They are born from the souls of men lost in the woods and take particular joy in leading others astray to share their fates.

The Leszy picks up the pace as he speaks, heading for the spelldoor tree as it begins to yawn open. “One of the convoy, clearly the idiot, wandered into the

woods to take a piss and fell under the spell of the ogniki. They won't kill him, but they are certainly leading him to something that will."

"So what do we do?"

"Simple," he says, jumping through the spelldoor. "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst."

He lurches forward, nearly throwing Liska from his back. Cursing colorfully, he clammers onto a mound of earth, the ground squelching beneath his hooves. Liska nearly gags on the stench that rises around them—stagnant water and rotted wood and something distinctly like fish entrails.

They are in a swamp. It stretches on either side, shining and ragged in the rheumy moonlight. Trees rise out of the water, doubled over like men seizing in pain. Swamp weeds crowd around them, catching on Liska's skirt and scraping along the Leszy's flank. A fallen tree sprawls in their path, half decayed, and in front of it lie—

"Bones," Liska whispers. "Leszy, there are bones...."

"Looks like a boar," he says, unconcerned. "Keep your wits about you—this is utopiecz territory. It seems the ogniki are feeling especially naughty tonight."

As soon as the words leave his mouth, a distinctly human shout carries through the night.

The Leszy groans. "Aaaand I was right."

"What?" Liska yelps as the Leszy leaps onto the log, then a stone, then another shard of dry land, careful to stay clear of the water. A thin mist lies on the swamp, and Liska swears she sees bulging eyes watching from beneath it.

Before she can look closer, her attention is caught by the noise ahead: splashing and gasping, followed by another desperate shout. The source is a man, waist-deep in the water and floundering. He is broad and strong-looking, with a mastiff-like face that Liska would find intimidating if it weren't twisted in panic.

As they get closer, Liska sees a small hand, no bigger than a child's, emerge from the muck. It is gray, covered in festering boils, and its cracked nails scrape down the man's skin as it drags his head toward the water. Another hand shoots up to grab the man's shoulder; a third wraps around his wrist; a fourth digs into his arm; a fifth—Liska gasps. There are so many, hundreds reaching out of the

muck and filth. The water churns with them, lit by a scattering of tiny white flames hovering overhead—ogniki. They glow eagerly, clearly enjoying the horrific scene.

“Utopiec,” the Leszy says, half tossing Liska from his back. “Another type of drowned-soul demon. Pesky, but not very powerful, as long as you stay out of the water.” He shifts back into a human, shucking off his sukmana and tossing it at Liska. “Watch for trouble.”

Liska catches the coat as the Leszy unsheathes Wyrok, gleaming quicksilver in the moonlight, and plunges it into the swamp.

Water parts around the blade, exposing a sludgy, slick bottom and clearing a path to the trapped Litvenian. Where the swamp splits, utopiec hiss and retreat, diving back into the water. As they move, Liska catches flashes of withered skin and screeching faces that are unsettlingly childlike.

The Leszy steps calmly into the swamp, the muck reaching past his calves. He wades toward the Litvenian, who has collapsed to his knees, looking from the approaching demon to the water on either side of him, where the utopiec watch resentfully.

The Leszy stops in front of the man. Compared to the other’s muscular frame, he seems slender and delicate, but with his stately bearing he still radiates pure, unearthly threat. Shrinking back, the Litvenian crosses himself, snarling something that sounds like a curse. Then he struggles to his feet and charges at the Leszy.

The Leszy braces himself, but the man is twice his width, and mud makes for unsteady terrain. With her heart in her throat, Liska watches the men collide, grapple, then go sprawling into the water. The waiting utopiec spring forward, reaching with spindly arms, grabbing at their hair and clothes to yank them beneath the surface.

“Leszy!” Liska screams. She runs for him, but the path through the swamp has already flooded. She is left facing an ink-black bog, churning and frothing as thousands of utopiec converge on the fallen men. One of the demons notices Liska. It turns, a rotting tongue slipping out from its lips, and leaps toward her.

Cursing, she stumbles back from the bank. The creature shrieks in dismay, splashing her with fetid water before submerging itself once more.

Liska continues to back away, body taut with panic. If she doesn't get the Leszy out soon, the creatures will surely drown him. But if she steps into the water, she will only join him. There must be a spell, something, to free him. But what?

Her magic wakes on cue, rising with such eagerness that she feels it in her throat. The in-between unfurls around her, a starscape of glimmering souls. The Driada pulses brightly, great roots and vast tree crowns and thousands of little growing things forming a dazzling network of life.

Liska fixes on the closest of the bright souls. It belongs to a hunched oak, so thick it would take five people to wrap their arms around its trunk. She reaches for it, picturing Tata's hands lifting her from the Stodoła stream when she'd fallen in as a child.

"Please," Liska whispers, then switches to godspeech. "*Bring them to me.*"

With a groan, the tree rights itself, shaking off a scattering of leaves. Stiffly, it extends its branches toward the fray, reaching for the Leszy's head as it breaches the water. But the utopiec are more clever than Liska anticipated—as soon as the branches get close enough, the creatures spring up, snapping and crushing them with unnatural strength. The tree recoils as if stung, and Liska senses its wrath like it is her own.

"One more time," she says, sending out more magic. The tree begins to glow blue, each crack in its bark outlined like a vein. She can feel it reconsidering, evaluating the situation. Then it shudders and begins to bend.

Liska stares in awe as the oak bows, leaning over and stretching out until it forms a bridge between Liska and the struggling men. She doesn't hesitate—she rushes across the trunk, summoning Onegdaj. The dagger appears in her hands in a flash of blue, and she uses it to slash at any utopiec arms getting too close for comfort.

"Leszy!" she screams again, bending over the water where she last saw him. The demon surfaces, towing the sputtering Litvenian under his arm. At the same moment, a utopiec latches its claws around Liska's ankle, dragging her back. By some miracle, she manages to grab the Leszy and help him haul the Litvenian onto the tree. As soon as he gets to his feet, he catches her by the hand, throws the Litvenian's arm over his shoulder, and kicks at the utopiec still

clinging to her leg. They run across the tree-bridge, stumbling as utopiec reach for them. When they finally make it onto dry ground, they all collapse, breathing hard, covered from head to toe in mud. The oak tree straightens once more, seeming just as tired as they are by the ordeal.

The Leszy is the first to recover, sitting up and spitting out a stream of black swamp water. “How did you do that?”

Liska coughs. “Do what?”

“That was a Driada tree. They hardly even obey me, and I *created* them.” There are red marks on his face and neck from the blunt nails of utopiec, his shirt torn nearly in half and hanging in tatters around his pale, well-muscled chest. It takes all of Liska’s willpower not to stare.

“I just asked it politely,” she says, wiping her hands on her skirt.

“She asked it *politely*.” The demon makes a sound that is half laugh, half wheeze. “I resent you, you absolute madwoman.”

“Likewise, terrible demon.” She casts a glance at the Litvenian, who is staring at them in stupefied horror. “What about him?”

“I don’t think he’ll be foolish enough to attack me again.” The Leszy pins the man with a glare, then growls a curt sentence in Litvenian. The man nods fervently, clasping his hands in something that could either be an expression of gratitude or a plea for mercy.

Once they have recovered, they lead the man back to the path he strayed from. There, the Leszy shoves him firmly through the trees and onto a dirt road, sending him stumbling into the arms of his panicked companions. The Leszy does not stay to watch the reunion—merely turns on his heel, transforms into a stag, and strides back the way they came. Liska lingers behind him, warm gratification filling her as she listens to the relieved exclamations of the Litvenian troupe, the clattering of cartwheels as they resume their journey.

Once the caravan is out of sight, she picks up her mud-hardened skirts and jogs after the Leszy.



They are not far from a spelldoor tree when Liska hears the sound of running water. Snapped out of her exhaustion, she glances around, half recognizing her

surroundings from one of her trips with the Leszy. The Driada's river is nearby. A river means clean water, clean water means a bath, and there is nothing in the world that sounds more appealing to Liska right now.

"Leszy," she calls. "I'll be right back."

Ahead, the forest brightens, indicating a clearing. A cluster of mossy rocks blocks her path, and she scrambles onto it eagerly, following the sound of the river. Her movements are clumsier than usual—spellcasting has left her exhausted, her magic recumbent against her diaphragm. If she tries to use it, she thinks she might faint.

All of a sudden, one of the smaller stones comes loose beneath her foot. Liska gasps, pinwheeling her arms in a futile attempt to right herself.

The Leszy catches her from behind, human again. "What on earth are you doing, fox?" he demands, pushing her upright.

Liska jerks back, surprised by the warmth of his touch. "I just want to wash off. I'll be quick, I promise." Flustered, she scrambles over the stones and through the trees.

She has to stifle a gasp. The clearing is far lovelier than she expected, almost suspiciously so. Overhead, the sky is wreathed by slender birches, their branches parting like theater curtains to show a concert of stars. A few golden leaves scatter across the ground, bumping into soft ferns and tall, wide-brimmed toadstools.

A waterfall dominates the clearing: a slender, humming entity sparkling beneath a shaft of moonlight, tumbling into a deep pool before thinning into a stream. The pool is lined with stones held together by the roots of a weeping willow, speckled with moss and five-petaled flowers that glitter as if painted in starlight.

Suddenly giddy, Liska strips off her sodden outerwear, eager to clean off as much swamp filth as she can. A stench rises from her clothing as she plunges it into the stream, and she exhales in relief when the smell begins to dwindle.

Through it all, the Leszy stands stock-still behind her, his confusion almost palpable. He himself is already clean, his clothing perfectly pressed, as though he has spent his night admiring scenery instead of fighting nightmarish bog-creatures. "Fox," he says carefully. "You do realize there's a spell for that?"

She shakes out her dripping skirt. "I'm out of magic."

"Ah. Well, why didn't you say so? I could have saved you all this trouble."

Liska purses her lips. Asking for his help hadn't even occurred to her, but frankly, she doesn't think there is any spell in the world that could make her feel clean right now. "Save it," she says, gathering her clothes. She feels somewhat better, though her chemise and petticoat are still dirty, and her skin itches from it. She tries not to look at the Leszy as she gets to her feet—in Stodoła, being seen in this state by a man would be considered scandalous, nearly sinful.

But he's a demon. Well, a sort-of demon. Surely, he doesn't count.

Her body seems to disagree. Her toes curl as she becomes acutely aware of his gaze, heavy as a hand on the back of her neck. It feels cautious, but also unrelenting, *wanting*. Liska knows the feeling all too well. She has been ignoring it in herself for weeks, and now it answers in kind.

Perhaps it's the remnant adrenaline from the fight, but she is filled with a strange buzz, like the time she and Marysieńka stole a bottle of her father's *wódka* and took a swig each before they were caught. He is a demon, and this is temptation, and this is dangerous. But so is a swamp full of utopiec and a spirit-wood on Kupała Night. She wants a moment, just a moment, where she can let go of the reins on her life, stop worrying about future or past and just *be*.

She takes a breath. Gathers her strength. Then she marches up and takes the demon's hand, tugging him toward the pool. "Come on."

To her surprise, he resists. "We cannot. You know we cannot—"

"What, cannot rest for even a moment?" She looks at him, dares him to contradict her. "The wood is calm, Leszy. No demons have breached your wards in weeks. And you have me in this fight against Weles. You're not alone anymore."

His jaw tenses. "I don't know..."

"Fine then," she says, chipper. "You're afraid of a little water, so I'll go by myself."

"I am *not* afraid," he grinds out. "I'm being rational."

"That would be a first!"

"Is this what a good, pious village girl would do?" he argues. "Does the Faith not call for chastity?"

“It also forbids us from cavorting with demons,” Liska points out, wading into the water and clenching her teeth against the cold. “But I understand! We all have our fears.”

Behind her, she hears the rustle of clothes being pulled off, the Leszy muttering something about “mutinous peasant girls with no common sense.” She smiles with satisfaction. Apparently the way to get a demon to do your bidding is to question its mettle.

She dares a glance over her shoulder, and her heart trips over itself. The Leszy faces away from her, holding his shirt in his hands. His back is exposed, proud and slender, marbled with seven hundred years’ worth of scars. Muted light dances along his antlers, across his soft hair, and over his shoulder blades. He looks ethereal, angelic.

“Does this satisfy you, fox?” His voice is deeper now, silken and teasing.

“It’s decent,” she calls back, hoping the darkness will hide her flush. From the corner of her eye, she watches the Leszy wade into the pool, magic sparking from his fingertips. A moment later, she realizes she has stopped shivering. The water around her heats slowly, pleasantly, until steam rises from the surface.

“You warmed it!” she exclaims.

He shrugs, giving her a half smile. “I couldn’t have my not-so-clever fox catching a cold now, could I?”

She smiles back at him, ready with a retort, but she realizes in the same moment just how near he is, just how small the pool. All her clever thoughts vanish. The demon goes statue still in turn, and she can see the realization flicker over his face—the wrongness and the rightness and the intimacy of what they are doing, plain across his features.

The Leszy steps back first, the tips of his ears redder than usual. He ducks down and cups water in his hands, splashing his face. Liska cannot help but watch, mesmerized, as it runs in rivulets down his cheekbones, drips from the ends of his hair.

He catches her eyes. Embarrassed, she turns away, wading toward the waterfall with her chemise streaming around her. She tips her head under the cascade, biting her lip against the cold—the Leszy’s spell only warmed the water

in the pool beneath—and undoes her braids, tossing the soaked ribbons onto the rocks.

She is suddenly, deeply self-conscious. She is not very pretty, nor is she very ugly—she is merely average: average height, average weight, with hips declared “decent for bearing children” by old Pani Jankowa. It was always enough for her. It made her *normal*. But now she wishes she were something like the Leszy—something beautiful, otherworldly, something that could make his heartbeat stutter like hers does.

Spluttering softly, Liska backs away from the waterfall. She gathers the heavy curls from her neck, pushes the lock of white from her eyes. Scrubs at her shoulders, her face. She doesn’t want to turn around; she can feel the Leszy watching her again.

“Liska?” His voice is strangely husky. “Your hair—”

“It’s a mess, I know.” She can feel the snarls and tangles beneath her palms, clumped with mud and leaves.

“Shall I...?”

Her arms, already tired from the earlier fight, are aching as she raises them to untangle her hair. Nervously, she lowers them. A quiet permission.

The water ripples as he approaches. His fingers brush against her hair, run through it with silken reverence. Despite the heated water, a shiver waltzes across her skin. Her heart stumbles, trips. Rights itself, falters. Pleasure threads through her, and she lets her eyes drift closed, succumbing to the sensation.

“It’s beautiful, you know,” the Leszy says. He is done untangling it now, and he simply toys with it, running it through his fingers, nails scratching her scalp. God, it feels *good*. When he stops, it takes all her willpower not to beg him to start again.

“One moment,” he murmurs.

Liska watches over her shoulder as he turns away briefly. When he looks back, he is holding something in the palm of his hand: a twinkling flower from the rock face, moonlight slipping off its velveteen petals.

He tucks it behind Liska’s ear.

“I must tell you, my dear fox,” says the Leszy, “that you deserve someone far better than me. And yet—” His fingers brush the tip of her ear, linger there.

“And yet, and yet *and yet*, I am a selfish creature, and I do not want to let you go.”

“Eliasz...” That is all she can manage. Her heart is pounding, resonant with desire. He is so close, so very close. They have been close before, but this time... it may be night, but the full moon lights the water, and they are both in their underthings. Though she tries not to think of it, she has always had a good imagination, and the outline of his body is not helping. Neither is the lithe muscle of his chest, close enough to touch, or the pout of his lips as he licks them.

“Do not go back to that village, Liska.” He holds her gaze, steadfast. “Stay here with me. Stay, and you can have all the power and magic you desire. Stay, and you can be anyone you want.”

Oj, she should hesitate. It would be the rational thing to do. But she cannot. It is far too late. In a way, her heart has turned into a forest too—the Driada is in her veins now, and she has begun to love it, all its treachery and darkness and monsters.

“Very well,” she whispers, though guilt rises within her at the thought of leaving home. “Very well, then, Eliasz; I will stay. But this is a bargain, and I ask something in return.”

“What is that?”

She takes his face in her hands, curls her fingers in his down-soft hair, and kisses him.

The Leszy gasps, and for an instant Liska is afraid that she has made a grave mistake. A pulse passes, a heartbeat’s heartbeat, and he returns the kiss—a gentle brush of his lips, then intensifying, those elegant hands running up her spine and drawing her closer. She slides her palms along the firm muscle of his chest, fingers scouting out each scar. She is full of him, his taste and scent and touch. Water eddies madly around them, their bodies a hairsbreadth apart.

The Leszy pulls back, shortened breath warm against her cheek. “All right?”

Two simple words. *All right?* Yes, she is, of course she is. But God no, she isn’t. It’s thrilling and terrible and wonderful all at once.

She nods, eyes afire.

“God have mercy,” he murmurs. “You are going to be the end of me.”

He pulls her in fiercely, kissing the base of her throat, then her jaw, then her mouth. Liska catches his lip with her teeth. The Leszy makes a low sound in the back of his throat, half purr and half growl, and his hands tighten on her waist. Smoothly he lifts her onto one of the moss-covered rocks, standing beneath her. When he looks up, it is through his eyelashes, and in his eyes is worship, pure and unveiled devotion.

Liska leans forward. She grabs his antlers, their surface rough beneath her palms, and pulls his head back for a deeper kiss. His mouth is satin slick against hers, his fingers hitching up her chemise as they travel along her thighs. Pleasure sears through her, nearly unbearable. She is blazing, she is dreaming, she is more awake than ever before.

Around them, white flowers dazzle and shine, swaying in the breeze. The air warms as magic crackles, motes of light—periwinkle blue and fern green—rising from their skin and drifting overhead. Liska skims her fingers up the column of the Leszy's throat, entreating him to come out of the water, to close the distance between them. He begins to climb after her, powerful beneath her hands, water tracing shimmering streaks across his body. Her hands find his waistband, close around it, and—

A twig snaps, deep in the woods somewhere.

The spell shatters. Breaking apart, they both turn toward the sound.

Liska feels the Leszy's heartbeat jump beneath her palm, his muscles going taut as he puts a protective arm around her. When nothing more happens, he pulls away, bowing his head with an apologetic sigh. Above, motes of magic flicker and pop, vanishing one by one.

Liska smiles sadly, laying a hand on the back of his neck. "It's near dawn, anyway. Jaga will be worried."

"That beast doesn't worry about anything but her next meal," the Leszy grumbles. He steps back into the water and takes her hand, pressing a meticulous, lingering kiss to her palm.

"Come on, then, not-so-clever fox. Let's go home."

WELES'S PUNISHMENT

IT IS NEARLY DAWN WHEN Liska and the Leszy return to the House Under the Rowan Tree, dew glinting on the underbrush like scattered diamonds. Embarrassment has finally caught up to Liska, and she finds herself unable to look the Leszy in the face, her thoughts constantly pulled back to the pool. She wishes they had never started. She wishes they had never stopped.

She wonders if kissing a demon is an appropriate thing to admit at confession.

Finally she pauses on the porch steps, trying to collect herself. In an absentminded motion, she raises her hand to tuck a curl behind her ear and finds the soft petals of the starlight flower.

It nearly slips out between her fingers. She flounders after it, but the Leszy is faster—he catches it before it can fall to the ground and presses it delicately into Liska's hands. Phantom feelings ghost across her skin, memories of his breath against her cheek and his hands on the small of her back, lifting her onto the rocks. Her ears heat, and she looks down.

“It was a stolen moment,” the Leszy says quietly.

“I know,” she replies, fidgeting with the flower in her hands. “I only wish... I wish I knew what to call this. Between us.”

He glances away, hair ruffled by the breeze. “Some things are best left unnamed.”

Liska's heart gives a crestfallen pang, but she tries to ignore it. The Leszy is right, she reasons. Whatever they shared will stay in that clearing, undefined for

eternity. Yet the consequences are undeniable—in one reckless moment, Liska has agreed to it all. She has committed herself to the very magic she was taught to fear, embraced a wild unknown instead of the steady certainty she always craved. In losing one thing, she has gained another. She has chosen the House Under the Rowan Tree over Stodoła, and though she grieves what she has given up, she does not regret it.

She wonders if a sculptor feels this way when he chisels stone into statue, knowing it can never return to its previous form.

Trying to hide her turmoil, Liska turns her back to the Leszy, gaze roaming over the gardens, the distant gate, the shadow-drowned wilderness surrounding it all. She twirls the flower idly in her hands. Nothing moves in the Driada—no animals, no spirits, not even the wind.

“It’s so quiet,” she says in realization.

The Leszy hums behind her. “It always is, right before dawn.” His shoulder brushes against hers as he moves to her side, resting his hands on the railing. “It feels like a different place, does it not? A moment slipped out of time, belonging to neither night nor day.”

As if the sky can hear his words, the deepest hues of night begin to lift like a veil, the moon a votive high above. The quiet seeps into Liska’s bones. *The Leszy is right*, she muses. For that brief splinter of time, the Driada feels like a different world entirely—a transient place where the dark stands still, waiting for the light to arrive.

She takes a deep breath of it all, filling her lungs to the brim with balmy predawn air. The Leszy watches, eyes thoughtful, before reaching out tenderly to brush her jaw. “Best get some sleep, Liseczka,” he murmurs. “It was a long night.”

She makes a sound of affirmation, and the Leszy steps back, faint candlelight from the manor throwing his retreating shadow across the flagstones. The manor door creaks shut behind him, leaving Liska alone with the slumbering woodland.

Sighing contentedly, she bends down to untie her boots. Something draws her to a stop; the back of her neck prickles, a cold fear rushing up her spine. Even before she turns around, she knows who is watching her.

A familiar figure prowls along the wrought-iron fence, crimson eyes fixed upon her.

“Mrok?” Liska whispers.

The hound takes a step forward, eyes flaring like lanterns, and presses his flank against the gate. When nothing changes, he snarls, steps back, and tries again. Then again, and again and again, increasingly frantic. It is as though he cannot get through, Liska realizes. As though the Leszy’s wards are stopping him.

Suddenly the hound freezes. His ears prick, and he balks like a startled horse.

The manor door whooshes open. Liska jumps, whirling instinctively toward the sound, only to see Maksio peering out at her.

“M-Maksio,” she stammers. “You startled me.”

He looks briefly apologetic, then motions eagerly for her to come inside. Liska hesitates. She looks back into the wood, but it is empty again, quiet and vast as a cathedral. Only the Driada trees watch solemnly over the grounds, painted like icons by the first rays of sunrise.

Liska’s thoughts churn as she enters the manor. Florian’s hound has returned to haunt her after so many weeks. Why? She had almost expected it when she kept his tooth, but between the attack on Walkowo and her training, she’d put it out of her mind. She’d assumed burning the rest of his remains was enough to banish him. Yet here he is, just when Liska was beginning to let down her guard. What could he possibly want?

Maksio touches her arm, and she nearly jumps out of her skin. The boy’s fingers are cold. She tries not to look rattled as she follows after him, but her heart pounds nonetheless. Digging her nails into her palms, she forces herself to focus on Maksio, who presents her with a breakfast he has made with Jaga’s help: a plate of round racuchy. The cakes are torn and uneven, clearly made by an inexperienced hand, but their sweet apple scent has her stomach rumbling.

“It’s so early,” she says, glancing in surprise at Maksio. “Could you not sleep after we left?”

He shrugs, making a gesture like an opening book.

“Ah, you stayed up reading again,” Liska says tartly. “Why am I not surprised?”

He waves her chastisement away and rests his hands on his hips, looking to the door meaningfully. *What took you so long?*

“We...” Liska rubs her face, trying to hide her blush. “We took a detour.”

Absolutely appalling, Jaga comments from the oven. *So much for caution, girl. A wilted turnip would have been a better choice.*

Maksio looks puzzled, clearly—thankfully—not understanding. Liska opens her mouth, indignant, but before she can defend herself, the Leszy saunters into the kitchen.

“Ah, wonderful. I thought I smelled food.”

“Maksio made them,” Liska says. She considers telling him about Mrok, then decides against it. The hound didn’t seem to be able to enter the grounds—perhaps burning his bones weakened him somehow. Whatever the case, telling the Leszy would mean admitting that she’d kept Mrok’s tooth, and she would rather not do that unless she has to.

At the table, the Leszy sticks one of the racuchy in his mouth before ruffling Maksio’s hair. As he turns to leave again, he winces, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

Liska frowns. “Leszy?”

“Yes?”

“Are you all right?”

“Better than ever,” he replies, throwing her a wink. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get some rest. Do not wake me unless the impossible happens—the sky pours gold, or Jaga finally starts acting civil.”

Liska watches him go with concern, skeptical of his flippant demeanor. Was that look of pain merely because he was tired? Before she can think about it further, Maksio tugs her down to sit, sliding a plate of racuchy in front of her proudly, along with a wedge of sour twaróg. Liska takes the first bite merely to humor him, then another as her stomach remembers its hunger.

She is halfway done when a tremor passes through the House Under the Rowan Tree. It is a subtle thing, so faint that even Jaga doesn’t seem to notice. But Liska is now fluent in the manor’s language of creaking floors and rustling curtains and flickering candlelight, and she knows immediately that something is wrong.

A floorboard pops under her foot, prodding her urgently. She sets down her fork and excuses herself, thanking Maksio for the breakfast.

She holds back her panic until Maksio and Jaga are out of sight. Then she breaks into a run, hurrying to the only room she has yet to enter in the manor: the Leszy's bedroom, known to her as a set of ebony double doors with handles shaped like skeletal fingers. It is always locked, and today is no different. As she tries the handles, the manor's insistence grows, sconces flashing and guttering overhead.

Liska knocks on the doors. "Leszy?" When no answer comes, she tries again to no avail. Biting her lip, she reaches out to the manor, gathering as much of her drained magic as she can muster and picturing a yawning portcullis with its gate rising swiftly.

"Open."

Inside the door, something clicks.

Liska pushes on the handles. They open without a single sound, sending a rush of unease through her—the House Under the Rowan Tree has never been a quiet place, with its groaning stairwells and squeaking hinges. This... this feels lifeless, *lonely*. What she finds beyond only intensifies the feeling: a narrow hallway of stone, black as pitch and grim as death. At the very end is an archway of dim light. Liska shudders, rubbing her arms. What is this place?

Suddenly a familiar voice carries toward her.

"Damn you, Weles." The Leszy's growl is distant, echoing. "If this is what it costs, so be it. I won't give up the only—*agh!*"

The shout of pain grips Liska like a vise. She breaks into a run, conquering the hallway in a few short strides and barreling into the room beyond. She hardly has time to register the chamber's layout—shelves of books, potted plants, note-scrawled walls—before her eyes fall on the Leszy, standing by a velvet-canopied bed, his arms braced on the bedstand and shoulders curled inward as if to ward off an attack. His skin is pallid, and as she comes closer, she can see blood on his lips.

"Leszy!"

Upon hearing his name, his eyes, shut tight in agony, snap open. "How did you—" His words are shattered by another moan of pain. "Get out of here, fox."

“You know I won’t do that.” She is at his side, grabbing his arm and easing him down onto the edge of the bed. He tries to resist, but she slaps his hands away and presses the back of her hand to his forehead. It is beaded with sweat and far too warm. “What is it? Are you ill?”

Instead of answering, he slumps forward and reaches for the bedstand, knocking a glass to the ground with uncharacteristic clumsiness as he fumbles for the drawer. Liska moves to help, pulling it open. Inside are seven identical vials filled with cerulean liquid and one large bottle with the word *sleep* written in godspeech.

“Which one?”

“Any of them.”

She grabs a vial and pries off the cork, pressing it into his trembling hands. She doesn’t trust him not to drop it, so she helps him bring it to his mouth, his fingers brushing hers as he drinks. When he is done, he leans his elbows on his knees and presses his palms to the back of his neck, white hair plastered to his temples with sweat. Instinctively, Liska puts a comforting hand on his back.

“You’re all right,” she tells him, though she is not at all certain.

Suddenly something moves under her palm. There is a fleshy *pop*—the Leszy cries out in pain, curling in on himself, and blood-sap blossoms across his shirt.

“Leszy!” In her panic, she does not think before pulling up the edge of his shirt.

“Liska, don’t—”

But it is too late. She sees *them*.

THEY SAY THE LESZY HAS NO HEART

THERE ARE SLENDER, BONY THINGS slithering beneath his skin. No, not slithering. *Growing*. Spiderwebbing outward like a sapling reaching for light, tracing ridges beside his spine. And in the place where blood is leaking, a branch, thin as a needle, has pierced his skin. It is made of the same pale wood as his antlers, and it thrashes like an injured snake.

“L-Leszy?” she stammers, lost. This is some wicked curse, far beyond her knowledge of folk medicine or magic.

“It will pass,” he says. “The potion takes a moment to work.” Resignation colors his features—he looks like a wolf caught in a snare who has realized it cannot get free. “Leave me be, fox. I can take care of myself.”

She gets the impression this has happened before. “Is Weles doing this to you?”

He nods, mouth twisting in pain. “Punishing me.”

“For me,” Liska says numbly. “For what we did. God, Leszy—”

“It’s not your fault. It was—” He grimaces as another twig breaks through his skin, dangerously close to his vertebrae. “It was worth it, every second.”

“The potion isn’t working,” she says worriedly, holding her hands inches from his skin. She’s afraid to touch his back, lest she agitate the branches further.

“It takes time. That damned demon... I keep him in control with these, force him to slumber. I usually take them at daybreak when he is at his weakest, and if

I miss the time, he... he begins to wake. He knows, he knows I defied him, he hates that I... I refuse to *belong* to him, I..."

"*Eliasz*." It hurts her to see him like this, shuddering in agony and utterly miserable. "I don't understand. Where are all these coming from?"

"He's *inside* me, fox." He laughs through gritted teeth, a cold edge of madness to his expression. "Has been since we made the pact. Don't you know what they say about the Leszy's heart?"

Liska's gut twists in horror. His curse—the legends are true. The Leszy's heart is wood, corrupted by a demon, *housing* it like a parasite. And now it is growing malignant boughs that wrap around his bones and tear through sinew like the thinnest fabric.

A tense minute passes. Another. Finally the branches begin to retreat, shrinking back from the surface of his skin until she can no longer see them. The wounds remain, vicious punctures oozing reddish sap.

"Let me bandage these," she says, but he only tugs his shirt out of her hands and pulls it down over the wounds.

"They will heal soon enough." Stiffly he straightens, but Liska can see the pain has not passed. What she saw was only the surface—there is no telling what unseen damage those branches have done. If they pierced his organs...

"Enough," he mutters. "You're looking at me like I'm a kicked dog."

"I'm worried about internal injuries."

He chuckles. "He wouldn't hurt me like that—I am his vessel, after all. Whether he likes it or not, he needs me alive."

That is not reassuring at all, and neither is the tight smile he gives her. She frowns. "How is any of this possible? How could Weles give you his power if you cannot take magic from another's soul?"

"Even magic has loopholes." The Leszy's voice wavers, as though he is reluctant to tell her any more than he has to. "By taking over my heart, warping my body, Weles made me into something similar to him. Our souls, too, became similar. His magic is not *his* magic anymore, not entirely. He retains a part of it, but much of it is entangled with mine." He takes on an unsettlingly smug expression. "Naturally, I couldn't summon an old god into my body and let him run amok, so I have kept him slumbering ever since."

Liska gives him a troubled look. “If he slumbers, Leszy, then how can he break your wards and let the demons through?”

“In pagan worship, Weles was considered the god of the underworld,” the Leszy explains. “He can control and command lesser demons. Even in his sleep, he keeps a level of awareness that I cannot suppress, and if he is angry enough, he lashes out with his powers.” He gives a small, rueful shake of his head. “After Kupała, with the wood thrown out of balance, it was easier for him to do so. Now that I have strengthened the wards, he cannot cause chaos in the woods, so... he enacts his vengeance on me.”

“Leszy...” She realizes that her hands are clenched and loosens her fingers one by one. “Is there any way to break your bargain?”

A corner of the Leszy’s mouth quirks up. “Trying to meddle again, dear fox?”

She does not take the bait. “If I at least knew the conditions of your bargain, perhaps—”

“No,” he says immediately. “No. There is no point to this. He is the source of my power. Even if I did find a way to banish him, he would take everything with him... including the Driada.” He presses a hand to his mouth, wiping away the last of the blood shining on his lips. “The wood must always have a warden, Liska Radost. Managing him like this is the best alternative.”

He sounds defeated, but she can’t accept that. All of a sudden she is back at Tomasz’s grave, feeling helplessness sink in as Marysieńka tells her to leave the village. And just like then, she sees the problem as this: a broken bone needing to be set, and if she does not do it fast enough, it will heal all wrong and crooked.

“Fox,” the Leszy says thickly, before Liska can begin inspecting the problem. “I know that look on your face. Please, you must let it go. I will not let you get tangled up in this.”

Frustrated, Liska snaps. “We kissed, you incorrigible antlered tragedy! You think I can just put this out of my mind? This happened because of me!”

That seems to soften him a fraction, though his expression remains guarded. “It was my choice, and I was prepared to pay the price. Now you must leave me be.” Halfheartedly he adds, “Please.”

This frightens him, she realizes. This vulnerability. Even after the moment at the waterfall, he is still afraid of what will happen if she knows him too well. She

has seen nearly every part of him, yet it feels as though she has merely broken the surface. What lies beneath... she doesn't think he will ever readily reveal it.

"Lie back," she urges him. "My mama always says sleep is the best remedy."

The Leszy waves her off. "I'm perfectly fine, fox."

"Please, that is the least convincing lie you've ever told. You may heal fast, but you still need time to heal." She pushes his chest gently. "Sleep. I will wake you if anything happens."

He may try his best to look indignant, but relief shines in his eyes. When he slumps back in the bed, it is with none of his usual grace, his antlers scraping against the headboard. The bed is large enough for four; she settles down beside him, kicking off her slippers and curling her feet beneath her. He watches her through half-lidded eyes, that smile still there, barely visible.

She tilts her head. "What?"

"What would I do without you?"

"You would be in far less trouble with your demon," she replies bitterly.

"Liska." He slips his hand into hers. "None of this is your fault. And frankly, it feels good to spite that old bastard." He chuckles weakly, his smile shattering into a barely concealed twist of pain. He seems about to say more but thinks better of it. Soon his eyelids flutter closed, his grip slackening.

Liska waits a moment before trying to pull her hand away, but the Leszy's fingers tighten again.

She shakes her head, amused. "*Oj*, Leszy, Leszy," she murmurs. Asleep, he looks strangely delicate, a snowdrop petal or swan feather. There is a certain softness to his mouth and a gentle upward tilt to his brows that gives him a youthful serenity, makes it ever so easy to forget his seven hundred years. The only sign of the earlier ordeal is the lingering crease between his brows, deepened by the firelight. Liska resists the urge to smooth it out with her fingertips.

"My dear, terrible demon," she whispers into the silence. "You open and close like a door caught in a draft. One moment you put flowers in my hair, and the next you hide yourself from me. I don't want to live like that—forever afraid, forever restrained. You may have stopped fighting, but I've only begun. And perhaps you're right—perhaps I can't solve this. But I have to at least try."

With that, she pulls her hand gently from the grip of the boy who bargained away his heart.

God, she prays, let him sleep as long as possible, and Weles with him. I need time.

Time to find answers.

On tiptoes, she turns to survey her surroundings properly this time. Cast in the amaranthine hues of a lingering dawn, the Leszy's room seems like a dreamworld, a parallel reality of whimsical gardens and antique peculiarities. The wallpaper is dark and peeling, the spaces between scrawled with illegible notes in the Leszy's looping handwriting. Something flickers in the corner: a mirrorlike oval framed by branches, propped up against the wall. It does not show the room's reflection—instead, it reveals bare trees, tall nettles, and a narrow path occluded by brambles. A looking glass into the Driada. Even in his own rooms, it seems, the Driada's warden does not rest.

Liska leaves behind the looking glass and approaches the desk, set at a large dormer window, then turns to admire the herbs strung up along the ceiling and growing from pots on every free surface. The pots are lovely, painted vibrant red and yellow and blue in the style of wycinanki. One stands unpainted on the corner of the desk, surrounded by dried paints and brushes, and it occurs to Liska that they are done in the same patterns as the plates in the kitchen. Another small secret of the Leszy's, simultaneously endearing and melancholy. This, she realizes, is how he must have whiled away time for seven lonely centuries.

As subtly as she can, she shuffles through the notebooks left on the desk, spooking a sentinel-moth off a hare skull being used as a paperweight. Most of the papers are notes, occasionally interrupted by circular patterns like the one the Leszy drew on the floor in his study. His handwriting turns out to be very, well, *Leszy*. Beautiful to look at, but utterly incomprehensible. What little she does make out seems to be musings, theories written in margins, and old spells recopied. Nothing of interest. She is about to give up when she notices a stack of papers shoved under a tome labeled *Orlica: An Arcane History*. Careful to move as little as possible, she begins to move aside the dusty book, then pauses, staring

at the red ribbon bookmark sticking out of its pages. Why would the Leszy, who has seen most of Orlica's life span, be reading a history book?

Curious, she opens the tome to the bookmarked section. Within the tightly packed text, one of the paragraphs catches her eye—there is a dot of ink beside it, as though the Leszy rested his quill there. It is a brief passage written in godspeech, as many old magic textbooks are. She pieces together the words laboriously.

Specific to the coastal tribes was the belief that every person has a twin soul—that is, a fated partner with a soul identical to their own. Such twin souls were tied in fate, destined to live and die as one. It was said they would share great powers, so many czarownik of old made it their goal to find such a person. If any succeeded, such records have been lost.

The book goes on to list other beliefs held by the first tribes, mentioning how they influenced the evolution of magical theory, but none yield anything further of interest.

“Twin souls,” Liska whispers, glancing back at the Leszy. “I did not think you were the sort to be interested in ancient myths.”

But the Leszy sleeps and gives no answer. Neither, in the end, do his rooms.



Weles's attack on the Leszy has left the manor especially vigilant. Liska can feel its attention on her as she overturns the vase in the parlor, pulling out Mrok's tooth from beneath the bundle of baby's breath. Brushing petals from her apron, she quickly replaces the flowers and turns the tooth over in her hands.

I do not like this, Jaga says. She is watching from the windowsill, a cat-shaped cloud of smoke wavering in the drafty air. *I know I have urged you not to trust the boy, but that does not mean you should chase after every forlorn spirit. Especially after you angered that old god.*

After coming down the stairs, Liska briefed Jaga on all her discoveries, and she is beginning to regret it—the skrzat is being very reasonable, stamping out the reckless blaze in Liska's chest. “I won't go far,” she promises. “Just outside the gate. That's where I saw him last night.”

And if he means to do you harm? You know I cannot leave the manor. I will not be able to help if something goes wrong. And it's not just the hound you have to worry about but a whole wood of demons.

She takes a breath. "I can defend myself well enough now. And if not... if I am gone too long, wake the Leszy."

Wonderful. And how am I to explain your idiotic plan, hm? "Quick, boy, your servant-turned-apprentice-turned-paramour has gone traipsing into the realm of demons to try to befriend one specific demon who also happens to be the lingering soul of your dead lover's hound! But don't worry, she ended up there by accident. She is certainly not trying to dig up your dubious and probably exceptionally horrifying past."

"I am *not* a paramour," Liska grouses. "And I know you can come up with something better than that." She casts a cautious eye outside, where Maksio is sitting and reading beneath a bowed apple tree. Blessedly, he is too far to hear anything. She turns back to Jaga, folding her hands in supplication. "Please, Jaga. I have to do this."

She scowls. *Because you are in love with the Leszy.*

"No. Yes." She shakes her head. "I don't know." She runs her thumb over the edge of Mrok's tooth, pressing down on the sharp tip. "What I do know is that all *this* relies on him—the wood, the manor, Maksio, even you. Weles is a threat to all of us, but he is also the Leszy's source of power."

As if in reminder, a scattering of rowan leaves scrapes across the window. Liska watches them fall, trying to make sense of everything.

"If I am to free the Leszy from his bargain, I must find a way to preserve his powers. I need to know more, much more than he would ever tell me. And Mrok... the first night I met him, he tried to warn me. 'Get out before he wakes,' he said. I think that 'he' was Weles. What if he has returned to warn me of something else? I have to know."

Jaga runs a paw over her ear. *You know that if the Leszy wakes, he will try to stop you.*

She nods. "Hopefully I will be back before then. And if I'm not, well... I will deal with that when I return. Eliaz Kowal does not scare me."

She has never seen a cat grin before, and when Jaga does, she wishes she could unsee it. *How delightful to see someone putting that awful boy in his place.*

Liska eyes her, frowning. “Do you really hate the Leszy so much?”

The skrzat chuckles. *It depends on my mood. I do not like the secrets he keeps, and it would be undignified to forget my grudge too quickly. But you seem happy when you’re with him, and for that he has been awarded my unenthusiastic tolerance.*

Liska drops Mrok’s tooth into her pocket, tilting her head. “I thought skrzaty are meant to serve the master of the house.”

Jaga stretches, amusement glittering in her eyes. *I do.*



When Liska checks on the Leszy before leaving, he is still asleep. It pains her to see him so diminished, lying prone in a too-large bed and breathing fitfully, and it hurts even more knowing she is using his weakness against him. Still, she doesn’t have a choice—the last time he found out she had spoken with the hound, he immediately tried to banish it. She cannot risk him doing that again, not when it could be trying to tell her something important.

Before leaving, she leans over the demon, brushing the hair back from his damp forehead. He begins to stir, and she freezes, but he only sighs deeply and falls still once more.



When Liska steps outside, pulling a shawl over her shoulders, she is greeted by a mouthful of heavy mist. It rolls, thicker than usual, across the flagstone path, drowning the Driada in a swath of billowing white. It is day, yet the wood is dark, its inky canopy keeping out a leaden, foreboding sky.

As Liska walks, fog slithers around her in snakelike tendrils, veiling her sight until the world becomes a blur of white. The gate emerges from the mist, so close that she nearly runs into it. She can hardly see her own hands as she struggles with the latch. A knot of fear forms in her throat—these are the worst possible conditions to be going into the Driada alone. A wiser person might turn

back, wait for another day. But she cannot. This is her best chance to do this without the Leszy interfering.

She steps out of the garden, keeping a hand on the stone pedestal of one of the entryway's stag statues. Fog coalesces around it—she can only make out the statue's hooves, and beyond it a bare few stones of the road, with disembodied branches piercing through on either side. The Driada's boundary is nearly impossible to make out.

Liska takes a breath, gathering her courage, and steps out onto the road. "Mrok?"

As if on cue, twin red pinpricks appear up ahead, shining through the fog like beacons. They are all she can see of the hound, but she recognizes his menacing growl, the sound of his claws against stone. When he walks into the wood, she knows it by hearing more than by sight, his footsteps softening against fallen leaves and his growl muffled.

Liska looks over her shoulder, where she can barely make out the antlers of the stag statues through the fog. She could still turn back, find the Leszy, and tell him the red-eyed hound has returned. Yet somehow she knows this is something she needs to do. The hound is here for her, and there must be a reason for that.

"Mrok, wait!" she calls softly, turning off the path. She steps into the tight press of trees, nearly tripping over a bramble thicket. As she walks, she opens her hand and releases a single mote of magic, a butterfly taking flight from her palm. It flies overhead, glowing blue, illuminating Mrok's hulking shape as he weaves through the trees.

Suddenly the hound disappears from view, melting into the tenebrous weald. Liska begins to jog, barely keeping her footing on the treacherous forest floor. Gradually the fog loosens up, enough that she can make out obstacles. She picks up speed. A fallen tree blocks her path, and she vaults it, then ducks between two trunks twined around each other.

Mrok is there, waiting. He stands on a mossy boulder, dim light outlining the flayed flesh of his rib cage. The Driada's river burbles just out of sight, drowning out the *drip, drip, drip* of saliva from between his bared teeth.

A dry branch shatters under Liska's foot as she lurches to a halt. "Mrok," she says, heartbeat thudding in her ears.

The hound growls once, rumbling like distant thunder.
Then he lunges for Liska.

A STRING OF ROWANBERRIES

LISKA BARELY STIFLES A SCREAM as the hound's jaws close around her sleeve, narrowly missing her arm. She stumbles back in panic, trying to put enough distance between herself and Mrok to summon Onegdaj. But she cannot focus on her magic—Mrok pounces a second time, teeth snagging on the hem of her skirt, tearing the fabric to scraps.

“Mrok, please!” Liska throws up her hands as the growling hound rounds on her. “Is it the tooth you want?” She reaches into her apron pocket. “I have it here.”

Mrok takes a step back, shaking his head. Liska's fingers close around the tooth.

At the same moment, a small shape barrels into the light: Maksio, wearing nightclothes, his brown eyes wide and wild.

“Maksio, get back!” Liska gasps. But the boy is only looking at Mrok, a strange, sneering expression distorting his features. He skids to a stop in front of Liska and puts his hands out just as Mrok leaps at them.

The hound's teeth sink into Maksio's forearm. Crying out, the boy whirls with near-inhuman speed, dislodging the hound and nearly losing his footing. When he lowers his wounded arm to his side, it does not bleed. Instead, a thin stream of mist rises from the wound.

“Leave Liska alone!” he shouts.

No, he *sings*.

Liska knows this sound. She has heard it twice now, the strange melody that weaves into her thoughts and turns her mind foggy. Only this time, instead of being drawn to the one singing, she is repelled from him, her body wrenched out of her control. She takes one step back, then another. Maksio continues to sing, voice rising in pitch.

With every note, Mrok flinches away, stumbling as though buffeted by the wind. Skin strips away from his body, muscle withering and rotting, his coat peeling away into shadow. As the glow fades from his crimson eyes, his gaze moves from Maksio to Liska. He gives a mournful howl, almost pleading. Then he fades completely.

Liska feels as if the ground has swallowed up her feet. She cannot move.

Maksio. The little boy, no more than eleven, a *rusałka*. A demon.

A desperate laugh bubbles up inside her. Why is she even surprised? She has kissed a boy with a tree for a heart and let a house-spirit sleep in her bed and fought an army of *strzygoń*. Of course the young boy would turn out to be anything but normal.

“Maksio,” she says hoarsely.

The boy glances up, startled. A horrified realization consumes his expression. He takes a nervous step back, preparing to bolt into the woods.

“Maksio, wait, please!”

Maksio turns to run, then freezes like a cornered rabbit. Emerging from the fog, blocking his path, is the *Leszy*.

The demon is furious. Liska can see it in the way he walks, merciless and precise as his antlers drag through the fir fronds above, sending a shower of needles down around them. She can recognize it though he wears his mask, burning from the stag-skull's sockets like twin flames. She can hear it in his breathing, short and brisk, labored in a way that tells her he is far from being recovered. And she can sense it, crackling like a thunderstorm around his skin, sharp as the hiss of *Wyrok's* blade as he unsheathes it with a white-knuckled hand.

Maksio stumbles back, his face blanching with fear. An inhuman snarl rises from his lips, and the illusion of the eleven-year-old boy trickles away like

melting wax. His cheeks hollow, his eyes grow glassy, and his teeth become too long and cruel.

The Leszy advances on him, seeming to grow bigger as he levels the point of his sword at the rusalka's throat. Maksio throws up his hands, eyes filling with tears.

Liska breaks out of her stupor. "Leszy, no!" She bolts to her feet, nearly tripping over a tree stump as she leaps between boy and blade.

"Don't defend him, Liska!" the demon snarls. "He tried to kill you."

He thinks Maksio lured me from the manor, Liska realizes. "He saved my life, Leszy," she says urgently, pulling Maksio closer and tapping into her magic. "This wasn't his doing."

The Leszy looks at Maksio. "Is she still under your spell?" Branches rise from over his shoulders, readying like arrows to strike. "I suppose you leave me no choice, then."

This is unlike the usually rational demon—far gone from his customary façade of arrogant calm. Something has rattled him, frightened him.

"*Shield us,*" Liska gasps out, sending magic into the ground at her feet. A wall of thorny blackberries shoots up between Maksio and the Leszy, wrapping around Wyrok's blade. The Leszy yanks it back, grabbing the tendrils in his hand. They disintegrate in his grip.

Liska shoves Maksio behind herself. "It's not his fault!" she shouts. "I came out here myself!"

The Leszy halts, breathing heavily. "*What?*"

"I went after the hound," Liska grits out. Behind her, Maksio is crying in earnest. "Mrok. He's back somehow, and he appeared to me. I thought he wanted to tell me something, so I followed him into the woods. But I was foolish, and he attacked me, and Maksio saved my life. Now lower your sword!"

It is like the Leszy is shaking off a nightmare. He lowers Wyrok with dazed sluggishness, his fingers shaking as he pries off his mask. Without it he looks lonely, standing among the shadows in a loose white shirt and trousers while fog laps at his bare feet. He must have run from the manor as soon as he realized Liska was missing.

Oh.

This isn't the first time he has woken up to find the House Under the Rowan Tree empty.

At the realization, Liska's chest swells painfully. "Leszy," she calls, gentle but firm. "Look at me."

His gaze latches onto hers. His eyes are those of a drowning man clinging to a frayed rope, his pupils shrunken in panic.

"I'm all right," she says. "He didn't hurt me. It's all right."

The Leszy falls into a crouch at her side, his eyes roving over her in search of injuries. His throat bobs when he notices her torn sleeve, lingering there until she pulls it up to show the unharmed skin beneath.

Only then does he exhale, shaking his head ruefully. "Liska, Liseczka, what were you thinking? And *you*." He turns to Maksio, his face hardening. "I knew there was something off about you from the start. Where did you get so much power?"

The rusalka whimpers, pressing his face against Liska's shoulder.

"Ah, I suppose you wouldn't know." The Leszy is still on his guard, but his voice has shifted, going from seething to stern. "That's the problem with ones like you, isn't it? You forget your demonic past, but never your demonic nature."

"Leszy," Liska says sharply, feeling the boy tremble.

He doesn't stop. "Do you know, I have met a mere handful of demons as powerful as this one. Even to me, they look human, *feel* human. They infiltrate villages, cities, and with them comes tragedy. Corpses in the night, children going missing—"

Maksio lets out an indignant cry, shaking his head in denial.

"Leszy, enough!" Liska exclaims, heart thudding a staccato in her chest. Her attention is caught by the wound on Maksio's arm, and for a moment she forgets everything else. Wounds—that is something she knows, something she can understand. Something she can fix.

"Let me look at that." She extends her hands to Maksio, ignoring the Leszy's huff of protest.

Reluctantly, the boy allows her to pull his arm away from his body. He has returned to his human form now, but beneath her fingers, his skin feels odd—sticky and amphibian-like, as though he doesn't have the strength to fully

maintain his disguise. His wound, too, seems to be getting worse—as Liska inspects it, gray mist leaks from the bite, billowing into the night in thin, sickly ribbons.

“How do I treat this?” Liska asks, stomach clenched in concern.

Maksio scoots away, drawing himself up and pointing into the forest, where she can hear the river fussing about.

“Rusalka draw their strength from bodies of water,” the Leszy says grudgingly. “It will be the same for him. He needs to go to the river.”



An hour later, Liska sits by a riverbank and waits for Maksio to reemerge. The Leszy, in the form of a stag, lies beside her, hooves folded daintily underneath him. It must be near midday, but it is impossible to tell, the wood cloaked like an ill omen in sullen hues of blue and mauve.

“You defended him,” the Leszy notes, sounding both impressed and bothered by the idea. “You would find light in the darkest cavern, wouldn’t you, fox?”

“If he was going to hurt us, he would have done so by now,” Liska says, trying to sound rational. “What else would you have me do? Could you banish him, after all the time you two spent together? Even you aren’t that cold.”

“You know I am not prone to sentiment,” the Leszy reminds her. “But I certainly would not have found it pleasant. I am glad you stopped me.”

Liska pulls at a weed between her feet, still tense and jittery from the fight. “I don’t know how to feel, truly. I never thought he could be...” She breaks off, shaking her head. “I suppose I saw a part of myself in him. He seemed lost, cast out by no fault of his own.”

“That was not entirely untrue.” The Leszy adjusts his position, lowering his great head to meet Liska’s eyes. If she were not reeling, she might have stroked his silken nose. “I think this form is new to him. He’s still adjusting to it, figuring out what he can do. That’s why he cannot fully hide some of his more... monstrous features.”

“Like his voice,” Liska realizes. “He can’t keep it from affecting us, so he doesn’t speak at all. But... I thought rusalka were female spirits.”

“Most are, because that is what they were when they lived. But there is no rule—he might have drowned as a boy and kept his appearance, or he might have transformed into his current shape by choice. Only he can tell you that.”

Liska rubs her eyes, a dull headache forming at her temples. Maksio, a rusalka. Mrok, gone again, perhaps for good this time. Once more, she is empty-handed, just as uncertain as she was before sunrise.

“Leszy...” She is afraid to ask the question. “How many people must a demon kill before they can disguise themselves as a human?”

“Many,” he says simply.

Horror slips down her spine. “So Maksio...”

“Most likely. It’s not pleasant to think about, but that is simply a demon’s nature.”

Liska looks at his sword, lying on the grass beside him. “You were going to kill him regardless.”

“I thought he had hurt you,” the Leszy says tightly.

Ahead, a splash alerts them to Maksio’s return. He surfaces reluctantly, his clothes sopping wet, his eyes wide and mahogany brown. Stepping out onto the bank, he wraps his dripping arms around himself. The wounds on his forearm are gone, the skin healthy and pink, but he stands like a prisoner on trial. And from the way he is looking at Liska, she guesses he is awaiting her verdict.

She thinks of the boy taking her hand in Kazimiera’s hut, refusing to leave her side. She thinks of him sitting in the library with the Leszy, eagerly drinking in every scrap of knowledge. She thinks of him pulling Jaga from the shadows and the proud smile on his face when he made breakfast for the first time.

What can she do? Demons do not choose to become demons, do not decide to linger, tied to Orlica’s magic. It is merely a cruel stroke of fate. This is how it may be, monsters and monstrosities, but who among them hasn’t done monstrous things?

In the end, she merely smiles at Maksio, earning an exasperated stare from the Leszy. “Let’s go back,” she says to the rusalka. “Then you can tell us everything.”



Dusk is underway by the time they return to the manor. They enter it in a silent procession, each of them in a different state of disarray—the Leszy is holding his shoulder, still clearly aching from his wounds; Liska’s clothes are torn beyond repair; and Maksio looks like he wants to crawl under the nearest chair.

Jaga greets them all with a cackle and a flick of her sooty tail. *Now this is an amusing sight*, she remarks, hopping up onto Maksio’s shoulders. *They found out, did they?*

Liska gapes at the house-spirit. “You knew?”

Spirits know spirits, she says. *Anyway, I do rather like him. He feeds me jam.*

“He—? It’s for the winter!”

It buys my secrecy, the skrzat replies, unapologetic, and Liska decides that if the house-spirit trusts Maksio, then perhaps that is enough—even if it is based on bribery.

In the kitchen, Maksio sits down at the table with a loose leaf of parchment and quill. His hands are shaking, and when he tries to write, he splashes ink across the table.

Liska’s heart seizes. “Perhaps there is an easier way for you to tell us,” she says gently, taking the quill from his clenched fingers. “But you will have to trust me.”

Maksio nods, eyes wide. Liska kneels in front of him, still holding his hand. She focuses, tuning out all other noise, like she used to when sensing the thoughts of animals. “I need you to think really hard about that night in Walkowo, all right?”

Maksio nods again, squeezing his eyes shut. Liska reaches out with her magic, extending it toward the boy. It is barely a touch, yet she is overwhelmed by emotions, as though Maksio has thrust them at her in a hurry. She feels his fear, his shame, his guilt. Then she begins to see memories. They engulf her, coming in flashes, so brief that she hardly has time to focus on them.

Flash. Liska—Maksio—stands at the edge of the wood, staring past the tree line at the distant town lights. Something echoes inside him, telling him what to do, how to *feel*. It is not quite a voice and not quite an urge, but an overpowering command that has brought him here along with other rusalka. The others lurk nearby, joining him in song. Together, they call their prey.

Flash. The world blooms into chaos. The magic-bloods are here with their terrible swords, and they are cutting down all his kind. He turns to flee, but another rusalka blocks his path. They fight. Maksio wins, clamping his teeth down on the other spirit's neck. It evaporates into nothing. The spirit was old, powerful, and Maksio claims its powers as his own. His awareness sharpens, his mind clearing. He stumbles back, tripping over a moldering log. Why is he here? He needs to get away. The battle rages in the wood behind him—the only escape is forward, to the human lands.

Flash. He is walking through the town, trying to avoid the puddles of muck and blood and torn-apart bodies. He is shaking, and he does not know how to make it stop. Suddenly his eyes lock on those of a human. A girl in a torn dress lying on the cobbles, blood staining her shoulder. She opens her mouth as though to speak.

Maksio turns and runs.

Flash. It is daytime, and the same girl is leaning over him. She smells of magic, and more importantly, she smells like the Driada. Perfect. Maksio needs to get back there soon, because his power is waning, and the only way to keep himself from fading is to return to the river, his anchor. Perhaps if he can gain her trust, she will take him back to the wood.

Flash. The last memory is clearer, much easier to decipher, because it is fresh.

Maksio slips out of the manor, stealing across the garden and into the woods. He must get to the river soon and replenish his powers. He has been putting it off for too long, scared the Leszy or Liska will catch him, but it must be done. As he steps through the forest, heading for the river, he hears a scream.

Liska's scream.

He does not hesitate. He turns on his heel and breaks into a run.

With that, Maksio pulls his hand from Liska's grasp. Liska falls back on her heels, blinking as dark spots dance in her vision. They are both breathing heavily, but Maksio looks relieved, as though a great weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

“What was that?” the Leszy asks, sliding his hands carefully around Liska and helping her to her feet.

“I read his mind,” Liska says, leaning against him for support. “Like I used to do with our animals. I didn’t think it would work, but...”

“Well, he *is* a lesser demon,” the Leszy says sourly. “They have simple souls, simple minds. Tell me then, what did you see?”

After Maksio’s nod of permission, Liska tells him everything. When she is done, the Leszy looks pensive. He presses his fingertips into the table, looking from Maksio to Liska. “That feeling you described...”

“It felt like a command,” Liska says. “It *told* him to attack the village.”

Maksio makes an affirmative sound. Jaga hops into his lap, listening keenly to the conversation.

The Leszy scowls. “That sounds like Weles’s influence. As for the hound...”

Liska rubs her arms. “Do you think Weles might have influenced Mrok, too?”

“Perhaps,” he replies, expression unreadable. “Or perhaps Mrok was biding his time, waiting for me to let down my guard. Whatever the case, I do not think we will see him for a while after what Maksio did. That song was just as powerful as a banishment spell.”

Maksio’s expression is one of pure guilt. He drops his eyes to his hands, which are buried in Jaga’s fur.

“Maksio.” Liska slides into the chair beside him. “You saved my life. I’m not mad at you, I promise.”

His eyes widen, questioning.

“I understand why you did what you did,” she assures him. “I only wish you had trusted me sooner.”

He reaches for the quill. *I was afraid you would send me away, he writes. And I like it here a lot. I don’t want to go back to the river, even though I know I should.*

The words strike a chord within Liska, resonant as a fiddle string. “You needn’t pretend to be something you’re not, Maksio,” she says softly. “Not here.”

She looks at each one of her companions, filled with the most peculiar fondness. How did this happen? A czarownik with a tree for a heart, a meddling house-spirit, a rusalka with a newfound conscience, and Liska herself, a mere village girl, all living under the same semi-sentient roof. Each more unlikely than

the last, yet they have been strung together like a necklace of rowanberries, threaded by fate or God's will or something even wilder.

Maksio tugs on Liska's sleeve, claiming her attention. He taps the piece of parchment and the three words scrawled there, bold with hope.

May I stay?

Liska straightens, looking to the Leszy. The czarownik remains perfectly impassive, but he does not object, merely giving her a curt shrug. Smiling at him, Liska puts a hand on Maksio's shoulder.

"Yes, Maksio, of course you can."

ALL SOULS' DAY

“THE WOOD FEELS STRANGE TODAY,” Liska notes, sitting cross-legged on the porch. A day has passed since Maksio revealed his identity, and other than that discovery, she is no closer to finding out more about the Leszy’s bargain. Around them, early October has set the Driada aflame with the colors of a burning dawn—earthy orange and sumptuous claret and delicate yellow gold, weaving the wood’s fabric into a rich, fragrant damask.

“We’re three weeks away from Zaduszki,” the Leszy says, leaning against a baluster and fixing the cuffs of his shirt. He seems to have mostly recovered from his injuries, but he still moves stiffly, less graceful than usual. “The demons tend to be quiet during this time—something about a celebration for the dead intimidates them. It might be because superstition keeps people from crossing the Driada, though personally I think it’s all the weeping and praying.”

Liska looks away, struck by a sudden rush of homesickness. Zaduszki, All Souls’ Day, is one of the most important Orlican celebrations. At the start of November, Stodoła villagers will gather at the cemetery and listen as Father Paweł calls out the names of the dead, praying for their immortal souls. They will burn thousands of candles, so many that the cemetery will blaze like a beacon amid the rolling hills. If not for her magic, Liska would be among them, standing by Mama’s side at her father’s grave and murmuring a prayer together, one of the rare times they did anything in harmony.

“You can go back,” the Leszy says, growing serious as he notices her expression. “If you wish to see your family on Zaduszki, I will not stop you.”

Liska shakes her head. “I don’t think I’m ready to go back there.”

She doesn’t know if she ever will be.

A blast of wind shrieks through the trees, gripping Liska in a frisson of cold. She gets to her feet, pulling her shawl more tightly around herself. She has been reluctant to touch any of the strange clothing in the old wardrobe, but with the weather worsening, she is going to need warmer wear.

“I’m going to find a coat,” she informs the Leszy, slipping through the manor door, which he has left ajar and swinging in the breeze. “I don’t suppose you could conjure some tea in the meantime?”

The corner of his mouth pulls up in that laughing half smile. “I do so love when you command me.”

She tries not to blush. She fails.

In her rooms, Liska takes off her shawl before the dusty mirror. The movement pulls down the collar of her blouse, revealing the scars from the strzygoń’s claws. They are vicious white, stark and grisly against her olive skin. She pauses, running her fingers over them. She still hasn’t become used to their presence.

Admiring yourself?

Liska jumps as Jaga steps out of the hearth, walking to a bedpost and sharpening her claws against the antique wood.

“Have you ever considered knocking?” Liska complains, tugging up her shirt and opening the wardrobe, rifling through its sparse contents. After a moment, her hands find a fur-lined coat, with slits at the sleeves and a flared waist. It’s a little wide, but it will do. She shakes it out—the movement sends something flying from an oversized pocket and thumping to the ground.

A journal.

“What...?” Liska sets aside the coat and crouches to pick up the little book. It’s bound in expensive but timeworn leather, the pages threatening to fall out even though she opens it with utmost care. Inside are drawings, beautiful charcoal sketches done on ribbed paper. A jay, an old well, a grazing sheep. Liska’s eyes widen as she recognizes the shape of the House Under the Rowan Tree. And there, in the back. Could it be? A high-ceilinged hall, a place that can no longer be seen from outside the manor.

“Jaga, look.” Liska moves the sketchbook under Jaga’s nose. “Is that the...?”

“The library,” Jaga says, thoughtful. “I have a vague recollection of the manor looking like that.”

“This must be from before Florian’s departure,” Liska says. “I wonder...” On the next page is a laughing man, drawn in loving strokes with more detail than the other pieces. He is young and long-faced, with a carefree smile. There are places where the charcoal was wetted and smudged in the round, splattering way of water droplets. The next page makes Liska sit up in surprise: it is the Leszy, scowling and grim. His white hair is far longer, bound back in a queue, and he is wearing a high-collared zupan. The artist has done him no favors, drawing his eyebrows low and mouth long and thin, like he is a dog on the verge of biting.

“I suppose he doesn’t give a very good first impression, does he?” Liska says to Jaga. “Perhaps it—” She cuts off when she turns to the next page. It’s one of the final pieces—a self-portrait, done in the branch-framed mirror of the manor bathroom. The girl in the picture is round-faced, with small, dark eyes and shining hair bound carefully back. She holds a piece of charcoal in her fingers and frowns delicately at herself.

Liska finds herself caught up in the girl’s stare, searching for answers in the hasty lines of her face. Who was she? One of the Leszy’s servants? That doesn’t seem likely, if the make of the coat and sketchbook are any indication. And even stranger, why leave her sketchbook here? Liska is not an artist, but she cannot imagine leaving her work behind.

She keeps turning pages, mesmerized. The rest of the drawings are of nature: a squirrel and a fawn and the manor’s rowan tree covered in snow. Finally she closes the book and holds it out to Jaga to touch. The skrzat obliges, brow crinkling in the feline rendition of a frown.

“Anything?” Liska asks hopefully.

Jaga shakes her head. *It must come from a time before my death. I have no recollection of it or its owner, not even glimpses like I did with Florian.*

“And you don’t remember anything at all from...” She pauses, trying to be delicate. “From your previous life?”

I do not. Jaga sits down daintily, curling her tail over her paws. *No spirits do. The most we can recall is how we felt just before death. Anger, betrayal, sadness—*

these are the things that linger.

“And how did you feel? If—if I may ask.”

Jaga’s eyes take on a murky quality. *Afraid*, she says at last. *I felt afraid.*



Liska leaves her room with her head spinning, her mind a disorienting clutter of questions and suspicions. The House Under the Rowan Tree seems to echo her confusion, the halls turning from gold to silver as a rainstorm announces its approach. In the kitchen, she finds herbal tea steeping in a painted teapot, but no Leszy—he must have gone back to his study. That suits her well enough—she needs time to sort her thoughts, and being around the demon only muddles them further.

In times like this, Liska finds there is only one good remedy: baking. She settles on making szarlotka from chopped apple preserves, sweetened with honey and sprinkled with walnuts gathered from the Driada. As she works, she catches Maksio peering around the doorframe. His eyes are wide and anxious—he’s acting as though she might change her mind at any moment and banish him like one of the Driada’s lesser demons.

“Maksio, please.” She presses her hands into the szarlotka’s dough, sending up a cloud of flour. “You’re making me nervous, hovering there like a ghost.”

Maksio steps guardedly into the kitchen. He gestures to Liska’s hands, then the dough.

“If you want to,” she replies. “Could you fetch a jar of apple preserves from the larder?”

He does so, setting down the jar beside Liska and unscrewing the lid to peer at its contents.

“Don’t eat any,” she tells him, not looking up from her work. “We need to ration those.”

She glances over to see Maksio pouting, displeased. When he notices her attention, his shoulders rise with tension.

Liska sighs. “Maksio, there’s really no need for that. I told you, I’m not mad.”

He tilts his head, a mischievous spark lighting in his eyes, and Liska is simultaneously glad to see it and afraid of what he is about to say. With his finger

in the flour, he writes, *Prove it.*

“Prove it?”

He raises the jar with one hand. *Let me eat these.*

She puts her hands on her hips. “This feels like coercion. Aren’t you an old and powerful demon? You should be above this.”

I’m on his side, Jaga says from the stove. *Those preserves are life-changing.*

“So is starving in the winter,” Liska points out, snatching the jar back from Maksio. “In Orlica, we call this an addiction.”

Bah, Jaga says, *that’s a problem for the living. We dead should be given all the jam we desire.*

“Fine,” Liska says, throwing up her hands and setting the jar down between the smug-looking skrzat and even more smug-looking rusalka. “One spoonful each. Unless you don’t want szarlotka.”

They finish baking in a companionable atmosphere. Liska leaves the pastry in the oven, untying her apron and slapping flour from her sleeves. With Maksio’s arrival, she’s had little time to mull over the sketchbook, but now her mind returns to it. That girl... who was she to the Leszy, if not a servant? The Leszy has never talked about having other apprentices, and it is not normal for a guest to leave behind their coat and sketchbook. It would be so much simpler if Liska could look into the past and simply see.

She stops, struck by an idea that sets her heart thudding. Perhaps she *can* look into the past.

She just needs something of the Leszy’s.

She knocks for the sake of politeness before letting herself into the tower room study—she knows the spell to open it now. The Leszy is measuring out some sort of powder into a glass vial, held at eye level by one of his branches. The tower’s window shows a streak of sky above the swaying canopy, newly arriving storm clouds casting the Leszy in dramatic, steely shades.

“Can I help you?” There is a note of annoyance in his voice. He may have kissed Liska beneath moonlight and held her hand as he slept, but right now he is the warden of the Driada, and his duty takes precedence. He does not look away from the vial, which smokes green and purple fumes interchangeably.

Potions are an advanced magic, far beyond Liska's knowledge, and she peers at the vial curiously as she approaches.

"I had a question," she says carefully.

"Mm?"

She hops up onto the edge of his desk, careful not to displace any of the strange instruments scattered about. "You said the soul and the mind are intertwined."

"So they are."

"What about... for objects? If objects can have souls, can they have memories?"

He gives her a sideways glance. "Where is this coming from?"

"Curiosity." The lie comes easily, but not without a pang of guilt. "Jaga once told me the library is a memory—I've always wondered about that."

He focuses back on his vial. The powder within is now completely green, the color of his magic. "They can, but it is very rare. Sometimes they retain mere glimpses of the past, and sometimes, like with the library, those memories can be summoned back."

"Summoned back to... to reality?"

"Not exactly. You can see them and walk through them, if the item or place is powerful enough. This manor is... a little more magical than most things, because I built it along with the Driada. It's a part of the in-between, so it can do things other places cannot. Like hiding entire rooms, or betraying my secrets." He aims a vindictive glare at the ceiling. "Insolent pile of kindling."

On a distant bookshelf, one of the scrolls unspools, like a tongue being stuck out. The Leszy ignores it pointedly.

Liska's chest swells with affection. He is taciturn and inscrutable, her Leszy, but also strangely charming as he hunches over his desk, looking more like a wizened man reading ledgers than a formidable czarownik. On an impulse, she puts her hand on the back of his neck, smoothing out his hair. He makes a low, pleased sound in the back of his throat.

"I made szarlotka," Liska says. "It should be done soon, if you want some."

The Leszy dips his chin in acknowledgment but says nothing more. Liska watches him a moment longer before heading carefully for the door. He is too

engrossed in his work to notice when she plucks a book from one of the many stacks and tiptoes from the room.

THE MAN WITH A HOLE IN HIS CHEST

LISKA WAITS UNTIL NIGHTFALL TO bring out the stolen notebook. At the desk in the library, she turns it over in her hands, inspecting it—it is deceptively plain, with constellations embossed into the leather cover. She moves it closer to the candelabra, which watches her with seven flames like narrowed eyes. Outside, rain continues to drum against the roof, every pitter and patter setting Liska further on edge. Before her, the dark-eyed girl’s self-portrait watches with a small frown, as if puzzled by Liska’s intentions.

The notes are written in the Leszy’s usual scrawl, and it takes some searching and squinting before Liska finds what is most likely the spell the Leszy used to look for her magic. *The soul-searching spell*, he has called it. At the bottom of a lengthy text full of explanations and speculation is the intricate circle he’d drawn in chalk on the study floor.

With a quill and ink, Liska begins replicating the circle on the smooth wood of the desk. As she works, Jaga materializes from within the candelabra’s smoke.

“Good evening,” Liska greets her.

Jaga walks soundlessly across the desk, contemplating the sketchbook. Finally she asks, *What are you planning to do with this?*

“I’m going to see if I can bring memories out of its soul,” Liska explains, mildly impressed by the logic of her own plan.

Jaga grins, a flash of disembodied teeth. *This ought to be amusing to watch.*

“Let me know if the Leszy is coming,” Liska says.

Jaga snorts. *Do I look like a guard dog to you?*

Liska doesn't answer. She is already engrossed in the spell, rehearsing the string of godspeech the Leszy wrote down. Once she is satisfied, she closes her eyes, opening herself to the in-between. She can feel souls all around her—the sleepy manor beneath her feet, Jaga's fiery presence at her side, and distantly, the Leszy's earthy gravitas. She even finds Maksio, his spirit lively and youthful like the waters of a babbling brook. But the sketchbook's soul is dull, just a flicker from Liska handling it. No life to be found, and certainly no memories.

Liska furrows her brow in disappointment. She is about to cut off the spell when her attention is caught by something... *else*. Another soul, this one strange and distorted. Unlike the others, it is not a bright presence that demands attention. It radiates a baritone sorrow, as deep as a grave.

It's right next to Liska.

No, even closer.

It's in her pocket.

Liska's eyes snap open. She shoves her hand into her apron, closing her fist around Mrok's tooth. “Of course,” she whispers. “Why didn't I think of this sooner?”

What is it? Jaga asks.

“I'm not sure yet. I think... I think some part of Mrok's soul is still in here.”

Yes, and communicating with him last time went wonderfully, the skrzat says sourly.

“If something goes wrong, you can rescue me and say, ‘I told you so,’” Liska says lightly, trying to hide her uneasiness. Jaga is right: this could end horribly. But she cannot stop thinking of Mrok standing over his own grave, pawing at the dirt.

Get out before he wakes.

He'd shown her the most vulnerable part of himself: his corpse, the only thing anchoring him to the mortal world. Why would he have done that if all he wanted was to attack her?

Taut as a bowstring, Liska moves the sketchbook aside, replacing it with the tooth. Lying in the middle of her erratic, poorly drawn circle, it looks warped

and forbidden, like a witch's amulet or a pagan relic. She forces herself to breathe. Then, testing, she brushes her magic against the dark, pulsing soul of the canine. She is surprised to find it open, beckoning. It feels both impatient and anxious, like outstretched hands waiting to be taken.

This time Liska's voice trembles as she recites the Leszy's spell, blue light flickering between her fingers. As soon as she utters the final word, the canine's soul flares with power. It surges forward, enveloping her magic, and swallows it whole.

The tooth *erupts*.

It disintegrates into tendrils of darkness, racing in frantic circles about the room. One sweeps through Liska's hair, another tosses a jar off the bookshelves, and yet another blows out the candelabra's flames. Then, just as quickly as they appeared, they vanish. On the desk, all that remains of Mrok's tooth is a pile of ashes.

Liska buries her face in her hands, stomach plummeting in dismay. "Why?" she groans. "What did I do wrong?" That tooth was her last chance at answers, and her spell reduced it to smithereens.

Heavy footsteps carry across the library. In her disappointment, Liska can't even find the resolve to turn around to face the Leszy. "Go on, be mad," she mutters into her hands. "I failed anyway."

Liska, Jaga says, with such urgency that Liska's hair stands on end.

She looks up. "What is it?"

The skrzat's eyes are fixed on something over Liska's shoulder. Her back is arched, her claws unsheathed in alarm.

That's not the Leszy.

Liska jumps to her feet, sending her chair crashing as she whirls around.

Behind her stands a stranger.

He is an inch taller than the Leszy, and broader, with curly chestnut hair and sharp gray eyes. He looks no older than thirty, wearing a high-collared coat tied with a sash. Lace peeks out from his sleeves and collar, and jewels glitter in his ears.

But Liska barely registers any of that. Her eyes are fixed on the wide, gaping hole in his chest, leaking blood across his torso.

“Who are you?” she chokes out.

The man only smiles, putting a finger to his lips. Liska flinches; at the edges of his wound, she glimpses the end of a shattered sternum, the fleshy pulse of a heart. As he turns on his heel and walks toward the exit, blood seeps from the hole, saturating the fabric of his shirt and dripping down his arms. It vanishes before it hits the floor.

Liska’s pulse pounds in her ears, her stomach churning. Every sensible part in her body screams to run away, yet she cannot. She is caught in a trance of her own making—the hypnotic, addictive spiral of secrets unveiled. When the man beckons her to follow, she does so without hesitation. Perhaps it is a trap, perhaps not, but if this is her chance at figuring out how to save the Leszy, she is willing to take the risk.

The ghost—because he must be a ghost, mustn’t he?—guides her through the House Under the Rowan Tree with familiarity. Every so often, he trails his hand along a wall or windowsill, a look of fondness softening his features. When they reach the foyer, he pauses, waiting as Liska pulls a thick shawl over her shoulders.

“You know,” she tells him, trying to gather courage, “you’re not even the strangest thing I’ve seen in this wood.”

The man’s eyes crinkle at the corners. Looking at him, Liska decides he is the other side to the Leszy’s coin—where the Leszy’s beauty is frosty and untouchable, this man’s is grounded and pleasant. He is peculiar, yes, but she can still imagine him among humans, tipping back a bottle of wódka and telling tales with grand flourishes of his hands.

“Liska?” It’s the Leszy’s voice, coming from upstairs.

Liska whips around in alarm, but the ghost grabs her hand. His fingers are stone-cold as he tugs her urgently toward the door.

Jaga appears at the edge of the foyer. *Go, she says. I’ll distract the Leszy.*

Nodding gratefully, Liska lets the man with a hole in his chest lead her out the door and into the depths of a blustering night.

The air tastes of static and storm clouds; the Driada trees bow in capitulation to the wind, shaking raindrops and browned leaves off bare, spindly branches. The ghost strides ahead confidently. His grip on Liska’s hand is tight, but not so

hard that she couldn't shake him off if she tried. She does not. Something tells her that if she lets go, the man will keep walking and she will lose him. With Mrok's tooth gone, she is not sure she will be able to summon him again.

Thunder roars in the distance, rattling the earth. The forest blurs around them, turquoise and shrouded. Liska's magic awakens faintly, sparking across her hand where the ghost touches her. She feels as though she is floating, traveling far faster than she should. It is like the man has imbued her with his power, turning her into a spirit and freeing her of the constraints of her body.

Then the feeling passes, and they are in a clearing.

Around them, stone ruins jut from the earth like the spinous processes of a buried skeleton. Ivy and lichen have devoured them greedily, slithering into cracks and dripping vines from what might have once been a wall. Wooden totems and statuettes lie strewn about like discarded toys, carved into the shapes of sword-bearing men with long beards and many faces. The tallest still stands, a forgotten effigy in the epicenter of carnage, shards of a fallen column lying at his feet like offerings. On his head are antlers, carved to look like growing trees.

The ghost releases Liska's hand. A look of relief passes over his face. "At last I can speak," he says. His cadence is deeper than Liska expected, warm and cheerful. "My magic is only strong enough here, where my body lies."

"Your body..."

That is when she sees them.

Corpses.

Six of them, half buried beneath thick roots and white-capped fungi, placed at equilateral intervals around the antlered totem. Most are nothing but moss-speckled bone, their flesh long gone, but a few retain patches of skin or shredded gristle, scraps of clothing draped over their collapsed forms. These were not kind, clean deaths—agony is calcified into their postures, jaws frozen in screams and hands clawing at the dirt.

Hands... wrists... and on those wrists...

"No," Liska gasps. The corpse nearest to her wears a branch-fetter just like her own. "No," she repeats. "It can't be." She steps forth, wanting to run closer, to check each corpse and pray she is wrong, but the ghost man grabs her hand once more.

“Do not go into the temple,” he cautions, gesturing to the remnants of wall before them. “This is Weles’s shrine, and he reigns within.”

“Weles’s...” Liska’s stomach coils in sickening knots. Without stepping into the boundary of the temple, she cranes her neck, looking from one corpse to the next. Each one, as far as she can tell, wears a fetter like hers.

Bargains. They all made bargains with the Leszy.

Liska takes one staggering step, then another, then another, until her back is pressed against a crumbling wall. The stone is damp and cold, clinging to her shawl with icy fingers; her panting breaths fog before her.

The ghost continues to stare, still as the ruins around him.

“Who are you?” Liska’s every word is shrill with panic. “Why did you bring me here?”

“You don’t need to be afraid,” says the man. “You know who I am.”

“Florian,” Liska realizes. “The Leszy’s...”

“Lover, apprentice, professional pain in the behind,” the ghost—Florian—offers. “And that lovely skeleton, the one to your left, is mine.”

Ice fills Liska’s veins. She whirls around, counting the corpses. “Six,” she says. She looks at Florian, begging him to deny it, but he only inclines his head.

“One for every century the Leszy has been warden.”

“But the Leszy is seven hundred—” She breaks off, understanding suddenly how foolish she has been. Seven centuries, yet six corpses.

Because Liska is meant to be the seventh.

SIX SACRIFICES

LISKA'S FIELD OF VIEW NARROWS to only one thing—the hole in Florian's chest, leaking blood in slow dribbles. Her mind is already piecing things together, but she does not want to face the thoughts, does not want to confront the magnitude of her foolishness.

“Why did you bring me here?” she repeats, wrapping her fingers around Onegdaj's pommel.

“To tell you the truth,” Florian says. “Because you are the only one of us who stands a chance.”

“A *chance*?”

“Yes. A chance to save the Leszy and destroy Weles.”

“Dest—destroy Weles?” Liska stammers. “Is he the one who killed all of you?”

Florian hesitates. “Yes and no,” he says carefully. “This will be a lot easier if I show you.”

“How?”

He gestures to the ruins. “This was once a temple where pagan rituals were performed. Its soul is old and powerful, and it holds many memories—memories that we can enter.” He extends both arms to Liska, palms open. “Come with me, and I will show you how the Leszy came to be.”

Liska is too dazed to hesitate—she grasps Florian's forearms, wrapping her thumbs around his wrists. He inhales deeply, brow furrowing.

The world vanishes.



They stand in the ruins before they were ruins. Around them rises a temple, wooden totems guarding every corner and woodland creatures prancing across faded frescoes. The forest has only just begun to invade, ivy creeping up columns and young saplings sprouting from cracks in the floor. It is night, and the moon flickers erratically above, ducking in and out of thick summer clouds. In the temple stand two figures: one a man, and one... not.

The man is young, noble in bearing, with thick raven hair and pale skin that speaks of a life indoors. He wears an emerald tunic and black surcoat, a sword at his hip and a pack slung over one shoulder. In his hands he holds a book of fragile, yellowed paper, bound in thick leather and scrawled over with notes. Liska can make out only two words: *ritual* and *summoning*.

Before him stands a god. Liska knows it is a god, because it is simultaneously beautiful and horrifying: its body skinless and muscles made of wood, its teeth rotted and mouth stuffed with moss. Lichen shrouds its form like a ragged cloak, crawling with insects and threaded with tiny animal skulls. Skeletal branches erupt from its joints, rise like spines from its collarbone, and crown its skull with living antlers. It does not have eyes—instead, two white flames shine in hollow pits of a skull-like face, fixed on the mortal before it.

“If I could only have as much power as them,” the man is saying, “then I could do it. I could trap the demons.”

You have heart, mortal. The sound that fills the temple is history given voice, treasuries of enigma and millennia of knowledge folded between each word. *But your intentions are not selfless, are they?*

The man tugs at his sleeves in a familiar gesture. “W-what does it matter?”

Do not hide truths from an old god, boy.

“I only want to be their equal!” the man exclaims. “If I had their powers, then I could have done this long ago, I could do something great of my own for once, I—”

But why be their equal?

“What?”

Why be their equal, when you could be better? If you let me live inside you, my power would be yours for eternity.

As the god speaks, an earthworm wriggles out from between its wolf-sharp teeth and falls to the ground. The man looks like he might be sick.

Of course, the god continues, *the price for such a bargain would be far greater*

—

“I’ll do it,” the man cuts in. “Name your price.”

Your life, says the god smoothly. *Your life and your magic in one hundred years’ time.*

The man takes a jagged breath. Moonlight reflects in his eyes—they are familiar, fern green, and ever so hungry.

“Very well,” he says.

The god’s hands snap out, grasping the man by the skull. He screams in agony as branches erupt from his scalp—tines snagging and tearing at hair—hair that will soon turn white with effort when he summons forth an enchanted wood.



“I cannot watch any more of this.” Florian’s voice is pained. “Let’s keep going.”



The man—now the Leszy, antlers and all—stands once again before the totem, his arms crossed and chin canted up. He wears ornate finery, crimson embroidered in golden leaves, and rings shine upon his fingers.

“I’m afraid I cannot give myself to you.” His voice holds more authority than it did in the previous memory, enough to sound reasonable when denying a god. “My soul is tied to the Driada’s—if I die, it will collapse.”

A bargain is a bargain. The god is nowhere to be seen, but its voice cuts wickedly through the trees. *Unless...*

“Unless what?”

Unless you find someone to replace you. I asked for a life and magic in a hundred years’ time... I suppose it does not matter whose life it is. But remember, little leszy—

“Leszy, ‘leszy,’ you keep calling me that. I am no wood-spirit. My name is Eliasz, and you will—*agh!*”

He clutches at his arm. A tiny branch has erupted from his wrist—the old god’s version of scolding. *Remember, Leszy*, the god repeats in a purr, *only proper magic can satiate me.*



Florian’s consciousness tugs at Liska’s, dragging her away from the memory and into another. This time snow coats the ground—the Leszy throws a portly man down before the totem. The man tries to right himself, but his hands are bound behind his back; the crest of Orlica is emblazoned on his tabard.

“Eliasz, please,” begs the man. “I never thought—”

“Quiet, traitor.” The Leszy puts his boot on the man’s back, shoves hard. “One of the most powerful czarownik left alive, and what do you do? You betray your own brethren! What did they offer you? Wealth? Status? No, don’t answer—I care not for your explanations.” He steps away, lips curled in disgust. “Weles, here is my payment.”

The temple shudders, as if taking a great breath. Suddenly, thick roots burst forth beneath the totem, black as tar and sharp as needles. They rise above the portly man, throwing elongated shadows over his horrified expression. Then, as one, they shoot toward his chest. He screams once as they pierce him, then slumps lifelessly, suspended on the roots like a garish puppet.

The Leszy does not watch any of it—he stands at the entrance to the temple, his back turned. Waiting for something: rejection, or perhaps approval.

The roots retract, vanishing back beneath the soil. The dead man falls to the forest floor.

See you in a century, Weles says contentedly.



“That was the first,” Florian says. “Back when there were still many czarownik. In the next hundred years, when the Church began preaching against magic, most of us went into hiding. Eliasz had no choice but to seek out those who did not know of their powers.”



Autumn in the Driada—bare branches above, a carpet of brown leaves below. A woman strides through the ruined temple with purpose, her blond hair bound up in an intricate style and the hem of her puffy dress catching on slender briars. She yanks it free, stumbling toward the totem. “I don’t see any gold, monster! You said that if I did as you asked, you would make me rich beyond belief. Well, I did it. I learned the ridiculous magic nonsense, and now I want what was promised!”

The Leszy steps over a fallen totem, expression unreadable.

Noticing him, the woman scoffs. “I found your flower; I passed your test. What more do you want?”

“Peace and quiet,” the Leszy mutters.

The woman is looking at him—she does not see the roots rising up behind her.



They move on to the next memory. This time the leaves are green, and Liska gasps when the girl from the sketchbook steps into the clearing. The sun plays across her shining hair, illuminates the hope in her dark eyes. “It’s about time!” she says triumphantly, and Liska’s throat seizes. She knows that voice. She knows that crackling cadence, rough as firewood, though it is lighter here, more lively.

Jaga. That’s Jaga’s voice.

The girl who will be Jaga looks around the ruins, and her face falls. “He’s not here,” she says. “Why isn’t he here, Panie? He was supposed to be betrothed to me! If you don’t bring him soon, he’ll marry that penniless village girl, and—”

She does not finish. There are roots sticking out of her chest. When they withdraw, she wavers on her feet, horrible wet noises escaping from her mouth. Then she topples to the ground, the name of her betrothed on her lips.



If Liska could feel her body, she would be weeping. This is what Jaga died for: a man who did not love her, a promise unfulfilled. No wonder her spirit lingers—

Liska is only surprised she did not become a vengeful demon instead of a skrzat.

“Did... did you know about all this?” she asks Florian. “When you were with him?”

“Yes. After two years together, he told me.”

Bitterness coats Liska’s tongue. “He didn’t tell me.”

Florian laughs softly. “That’s because of what I did when I found out.”



He takes her to another memory. This time it is night. A blizzard howls through the trees, the falling snow thick as pearly tears. Orange light appears at the mouth of the clearing—a lantern. It is being carried by Florian, dressed just like his ghost, only with his chest still intact.

“Don’t I look handsome in the firelight?” Florian—current, ghostly Florian—asks cheerily, bringing Liska momentarily out of the vision. “It’s like a scene from a tragedy.”

Liska might have shushed him if she weren’t about to watch him die.



In the memory, Florian places the lantern on the stump of a fallen column and crouches, beckoning to something between the trees. A moment later, Mrok—living Mrok, not the red-eyed corpse she has come to know—slinks toward him. The wolfhound’s tail is between his legs, his ears pressed back. He obviously senses the death and destruction wrought within the temple ruins.

“I’m sorry, boy,” Florian whispers. “But it must be done. I thought I could find a way around this, but... a century is almost up, and I do not want Eliaz to see this.” He scratches behind the wolfhound’s ears. “You have an important task, my friend. When I die, you must carry my magic within you until we find someone who can break this curse.”

With that he leans down, pressing his forehead to the hound’s, and exhales softly. From his lips rises a puff of crimson magic, taking the form of downy feathers that drift onto the hound’s nose. Mrok snorts and recoils.

“Now go!” Florian exclaims. “Go on!”

When the hound does not move, he steps forth, raising his hand as if to strike. “Go, you stubborn thing!”

Hesitating once more, Mrok flees from the clearing, betrayal shining in his dark eyes.

As soon as he is gone, Florian’s shoulders slump. He runs a hand over his face and turns on his heel toward the totem. Throwing his arms wide, he says, “Well, here I am, demon.”

He does not flinch as roots rise around him, rearing above like serpents waiting to strike.

Then his eyes widen. “Mrok, no!”

But it is too late. The wolfhound charges out from behind a ruined wall, teeth bared and mouth frothing in fury. He leaps at the roots, closes his jaws around one, and tears. Then another, then another, bark and splinters flying. It is futile. For every root he breaks, another rises. They writhe, lashing out, and...



And Liska is back in the clearing, leaning against a mossy wall, light breaking through the trees as the storm relinquishes the world from its stifling grip.

Florian releases her hands, sitting down beside her. “You can guess what happened next.”

A sob catches on her breath. She bites her lip to keep the tears down and nods.

“The spell I cast on Mrok, it enabled a piece of my soul to anchor to him after I died. Essentially, I turned myself into a spirit, one so weak I was barely conscious. I waited for centuries for an opportunity, and finally you presented me with one.”

“I did? How?”

“The first night you came to the Driada, you released a blast of raw magic to escape a rusalka. In my fractured state of consciousness, I was able to harness that magic long enough to reanimate Mrok and send him to the manor, hoping to communicate with you. I only had so much magic, so I had to be careful how I used it. Once Elias found out, he kept strengthening his wards to keep Mrok

out.” He huffs with mild exasperation. “Thankfully, the manor let him through regardless. It, too, wants Eliaz to finally be free of this curse.”

“Mrok was guiding me,” Liska whispers, chest swelling with gratitude to the manor. “But what about when the Leszy banished him? How was he able to come back after that?”

“The Leszy burnt his skull, where most of my magic was stored,” Florian says, crossing his arms. “It took a while to recuperate from that. It is God’s will, perhaps, that you held on to that tooth, kept Mrok and my magic anchored. Unfortunately, by the time we recovered, Eliaz had created a ward that kept Mrok from entering the estate grounds. He always was obnoxiously thorough.”

“That he is,” Liska says. She remembers Mrok’s teeth closing around Maksio’s arm and frowns. “But... Mrok attacked me, Panie Florian. He hurt my friend.”

“Ah.” Florian rubs the back of his neck. “That was a terrible misunderstanding. You see, I can only command Mrok; I cannot control him. I believe he meant to get you to hurry so he could bring you here, but I suppose he was... indelicate about it. Then that rusalka boy banished him, and I did not have enough power to send him again.”

“Then I brought you back with the tooth,” Liska says. “It’s because I fed it magic, isn’t it? That gave you strength.”

“Clever girl,” he says kindly. “Yes, it was. The spell you used was essentially a summoning, and it gave me enough strength to manifest fully.” His mouth twitches in a strange expression. “I knew you were the one, you know.”

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

“The one who could unravel all this, bring it to the surface again. You bonded to the manor, to Jaga, to the Driada. It’s as though you are a missing piece to the Leszy.”

Twin souls, Liska’s mind whispers. Her stomach churns at the thought. The Leszy sacrificed all those people, and she does not want to be compared to him in any way.

“I would never do what he did,” Liska snaps.

“No,” Florian agrees placatingly. “But you are the only one who can undo it. You—”

Abruptly, he breaks off. He raises his arms to eye level, and a panicked look overtakes his features. His arms have turned transparent, showing the trees behind him. The outline of his body begins to blur before Liska's eyes.

She starts. "Panie Florian? What's happening?"

The man's gaze turns apologetic. "It appears I have used up what was left of my magic. I do not have long left."

"No," she whispers. She has known Florian for merely an hour, but she already feels a connection to him—his easy smile, his irreverence. He reminds her, distantly, of Tata.

"I am so very sorry," Florian says. "I wish I could help you more."

Panic floods her. If he leaves, she will be alone, with her frayed trust and death at the hands of a demon looming on the horizon. "But—but what do I do now?"

"What you always do, Liska. You keep going." He embraces her, kissing her on either cheek as if he is not a ghost but a visiting relative, and he is not leaving forever—merely for a few weeks. When he pulls away, a slender black shape materializes behind him: a shaggy wolfhound, black as midnight with wise brown eyes. Florian scratches behind its ear, then smiles at Liska. "Look after Eliaz for me, will you? Tell him that I..."

He does not finish the sentence. She blinks, and both man and hound are gone.

Liska does not even have the chance to cry or tremble or scream. Before she can move, the Leszy runs into the clearing.

"Liska!"

He is in his stag form, but as soon as he catches sight of Liska, he turns human. He strips off his mask, hair disheveled, chest heaving, and freezes. A thousand brutal emotions flash through his eyes as he takes in the antlered totem, then Liska, then the place where Florian was moments before.

He utters two words, heavy and fatal as a dawning apocalypse.

"You know."

THE ONE WHO RUNS AND THE ONE WHO REMAINS

IT IS NOT A QUESTION. They stare at each other, demon and girl, the weight of truth crashing over them. Though they stand on solid ground, they might as well be drowning—they look like people who have swum too deep, then realized they do not have enough breath to reach the surface.

“I saw Florian.” Liska speaks to the Leszy but does not look at him. She cannot. If she does, she will see the man she loves, and she will be on the precipice of forgiveness. “He showed me... everything. *Everyone*,” she amends, sweeping her hand toward the six corpses.

The Leszy’s breath stutters. “Liska...”

He sounds like the fragile, desperate boy she saw in the first memory. The boy who sold his soul for belonging.

“I was going to be one of them, wasn’t I?” She holds up her fettered wrist. “You were going to sacrifice me.”

“Yes.” Something inside her wilts when he says it. “But... that was before... before all *this*.” A branch cracks beneath his foot as he steps forward. “Liska, please, I can—”

She does not think. Onegdaj is in her hand, then pressed to his throat. Light reflects off the dagger’s lethal edge. They are inches apart—so close that Liska’s heavy breathing moves the white hairs fallen over his face. She can smell him, the familiar scent of spring rain and pine sap making her heart ache.

The Leszy does not move. His face is expressionless, his eyes dull. “You cannot.” She tries to draw away, but his hands—beautiful, slender, snow white—wrap around her wrist, pressing the blade deeper into his throat. Blood-sap trickles from the wound, staining the collar of his shirt. At his side, a young sapling crumbles to ashes. He presses deeper. Several nearby ferns curl and shrivel to nothing. “You see?” he says. “Kill me, kill the Driada. It’s a cunning little trick. I cannot even take my own life—I must die by his hand.”

Liska pulls back, panting furiously. She wants to cut his throat. She wants to kiss him. But most of all, she wants him to feel how she feels, if only for a moment.

“Secret after secret after secret,” she says, surprised by her own deadly calm. “Every time, I hoped it was the last one. I will not ask if you loved me, but did you even *like* me? Or did you simply tolerate me, indulge me, until I was powerful enough for you to feed me to Weles?”

He swallows hard, licking his lips. “It wasn’t like that, I swear it. Yes, I withheld things from you, but you were *happy*, and I simply... I wanted to keep that as long as possible. It was selfish of me, I know, but you must understand —”

“Oh, but I do.” Liska’s fury is a quiet, icy thing. “I understand *perfectly*. You wanted to keep me *happy*, because it entertained you. I was your innocent little plaything.” She clenches her fists. “Jaga warned me about this, you know, and she was right. You never loved me, you merely enjoyed me.”

“No, fox, *please*, that’s not true—”

“Why should I believe anything you say?” she whispers. “Your words are worth as much to me as I was worth to you, that first night in the Driada.”

What little composure he had left crumbles like ashes. “Liska.” He starts toward her. “Liska Radost!” He is so fixed on her that he doesn’t notice the root protruding from the ground before him. His toe strikes it, and he pitches forward, catching himself with a grunt on hands and knees. When he looks up, his eyes shine bright and broken and desperate.

She thought it would feel good to see him defeated. Instead, it feels like roots to the chest, like she has already been sacrificed.

She reaches out, touches his face one last time. “Goodbye, Elias Kowal.”

Then she is turning, walking away with as much dignity as she can muster. As soon as she is far enough, she shatters, covering her face as tears stream down her cheeks. She doesn't have to look back to know the Leszy is weeping too, kneeling at the mouth of a ruined temple as leaves fall dead and desolate around him.



Liska cannot go home, she knows that much. But what is home? Is it Stodoła, where she lived a lie, or the House Under the Rowan Tree, where she has been lied to?

She does not remember making a decision.

She does not remember finding the spelldoor tree.

She does not remember when it started raining again.

She only knows that half an hour later, she stands before the blue-painted door to Kazimiera's hut, shivering and soaked to the bone.

Kazimiera opens the door on the third knock, raising a lantern high. "Somebody had better be on their deathbed if you're waking me up at four in the—Liska!"

Liska opens her mouth to greet the old czarownik, but all she manages is a sob.

"Dear child, what happened?" Kazimiera is wearing a worn, unembroidered gorset, her silver hair hidden by a kerchief tied beneath her chin. She herds Liska into her hut, quickly pulling the sodden shawl from her shoulders. "You look like you're about to turn into a rusalka. Come, quickly, sit."

In a matter of seconds, Liska is settled on the zapiecek—a bench by the stove meant for sleeping in the winter—a mug of steaming lemon balm tea shoved into her hands and a moth-eaten blanket thrown over her shoulders. Kazimiera stokes the stove and comes to stand in front of her, holding the back of her hand to Liska's forehead worriedly.

"No fever, thank God. Whatever happened, girl?"

"They were sacrifices," she blurts. "All the people before me, the ones who left their belongings in the wardrobe—"

"Who are you talking about? What wardrobe? Liska, slow down."

She forces herself to take a long, rasping breath. “His bargain, the Leszy’s—he promised the demon a sacrifice every hundred years.” In a rush, she tells Kazimiera everything, watching the old woman’s lips press together more and more until they form a dismayed white line. When Liska finishes, teeth chattering, Kazimiera sinks down onto the bench beside her.

“God be merciful,” she whispers. “Eliasz...”

“I was nothing to him,” Liska whispers. “All this time, I was *nothing* to him.” She says it again, because her heart is still in denial, still longing for the Leszy’s steady presence with every beat.

“That’s not true,” Kazimiera says, taking Liska’s frozen hands in her warm ones. “That much reassurance I can give you. He loved you, in his strange and taciturn way. You wouldn’t be this distraught if he hadn’t.”

Liska quickly stifles the flame of hope in her chest. “He was going to sacrifice me. He never told me any of it. He was going to walk me into that temple one day and leave me there to—to—but *oh*,” she says in realization. “If not me, then who? Someone must die, or the old god will take the Leszy’s life instead.”

“Then let it happen,” Kazimiera says sourly. There is anger burning in the old woman’s eyes, reflecting the acrid betrayal coursing through Liska’s veins. “It’s what he deserves.”

Liska wraps her arms around her torso, gritting her teeth against a wave of fresh, heartbroken pain. “The wood must always have a warden, Kazimiera. If he dies, the Driada will fall.” *And I don’t want him to die*, her heart screams from its cage. She swallows hard. “Unless... Is there any way to build a new Driada?”

Kazimiera shakes her head. “There is no one who could do such a thing. Eliasz had to bargain with an old god for enough power, and it still almost killed him.”

Liska fights off another shiver. “What about you, Kazimiera? You were his student. Could you do it?”

Kazimiera looks down at her hands, a pained frown twisting her mouth. Her brows draw low over her eyes.

“What is it?” Liska asks worriedly.

“My magic is gone, girl,” Kazimiera says. “Even in my prime, I was too weak to do anything you speak of. But what pains me is that if... if I had known about

the Leszy's bargain even a month ago, I could have given my life to that demon, bought you both one hundred years of time. Now..." She clenches her hands painfully, stiffly, into fists. "I fear I have nothing left to give."

Liska blinks away a sharp stab of tears. Once, she might have envied Kazimiera. Now she finds herself reaching for her magic just to reassure herself that it is still there.

"I'm glad you can't sacrifice yourself," she tells the czarownik. "But I'm sorry, too. It must be difficult to lose your magic."

"It is the fate of every one of us," Kazimiera says sadly. "Only the Leszy remains. He has always remained."

Liska removes one hand to pull the blanket tighter around her shoulders. Her braids lie on top of it, dripping rainwater onto the floor. "Yet it seems my fate is tied to his, Kazimiera. No matter which way I think of it, I have to go back. I have to find a way to save the Driada." *To save him*, adds her treacherous heart.

Kazimiera frowns. Her hands tighten on Liska's with surprising strength. "Listen to me, girl." Her eyes are depthless pools of wisdom, clouded by seven hundred years of loss and joy and pain. "Whatever you do, you cannot sacrifice yourself."

Liska bites her lip. "I don't want to, but—" She yelps as Kazimiera tightens her grip further.

"*No*. You are the last czarownik, girl. This world needs you. Perhaps I have grown sentimental and mad in my age, but I think God himself put you on this path. He meant for you to meet the Leszy, and if that is so, then He must think you can break this wheel."

Liska's eyes are drawn unexpectedly to the cross hanging on the far wall, over Kazimiera's bed. An unfamiliar wave of faith fills her, one she has not felt since she first discovered her powers. Could Kazimiera be right? Could it be as Father Paweł said—that she was given magic for a reason?

Or is she simply going mad too?

Kazimiera clicks her tongue and gets stiffly to her feet, her joints creaking. "It is a few hours still until sunup," she says. "If you are going back there, then you will need all the sleep you can get."

Sleep: now there is one thing Liska is eager for. As Kazimiera blows out the candles, she unties her braids to let her hair dry properly, then curls herself in the blanket on the warm *zapiecek*.

She lies still for an hour but cannot find sleep.

Another hour, and she is still awake, listening to the old hovel's occasional creaks and groans. Her thoughts flit around restlessly, replaying the night's events over and over again.

She thinks of Maksio and Jaga, of the manor and the wood, a world she loved yet left behind without a thought when she learned of the Leszy's betrayal.

She wonders what would happen if she does not return to the Driada—if she simply let the Leszy die. Would Weles take over the wood? Would demons once again swarm Orlica?

She tries not to picture herself with a hole in her chest, bleeding out on the temple floor.

“Can't sleep?”

Liska turns to see Kazimiera sitting up in her bed, silhouetted against the window. Beyond, the night is lightening to a rich, sorrowful indigo.

“I can't stop thinking,” Liska admits. “I... it feels impossible. I want to go back, I *have* to... but I do not wish to face *him* again.”

The old woman nods knowingly, rising from her bed in stiff, heavy motions. She comes to join Liska once more, the angles of her face deep and indistinct in the night's obscurity.

“It is difficult,” she admits. “I keep thinking of the Leszy I knew, trying to reconcile him with all you have told me.”

“And yet...” Liska crosses her legs on the bench, fidgeting with the end of the blanket. “Yet if he had not done it, more would have died from the demons running rogue in Orlica. He sacrificed those people to bring peace. How is that different from a king sending men to war?” She shakes her head. “Still, it feels different. Worse somehow.”

“Yes,” Kazimiera says thoughtfully. “It does.”

Liska glances at her, frustration rising. “I do not know what to make of it.”

“Neither do I,” the old woman admits. “Eliasz... he took me in when no one else would. He gave me a home, trained me, aided me when I called. During the

wars, he was my brother in arms. During peace, he was my friend.”

She exhales, long and audible and rasping wearily. “I remember a time when a plague swept Orlica, one that only czarownik could cure. But this was the time when the Church was rising in power, and most of our brethren were in hiding or already dead. The Leszy left me watching the border villages and traveled to the capital, where the plague was at its strongest.”

“I thought he could not leave the Driada.”

She shakes her head. “He cannot for long, and it weakens him greatly. There are spells to overcome that, but they are taxing on the body and mind. Yet the Leszy went, without hesitation, to aid as many as he could. And he did. With his help, the plague was contained. And when he was done, when he returned... the Driada’s trees had gone leafless in midsummer. Every branch, bare as bone. That was how much it weakened him. And what was left of his power, he poured it into his wards. He managed to keep the demons contained, but... the forest did not bear foliage for two years after that.”

Liska leans her elbows on her knees, staring down at her bare feet. Conflict roils through her, her stomach tight.

“The Leszy was never kind,” Kazimiera says quietly. “But he cared for the people of this land. I used to admire that quality in him. Now... I cannot help but think that he was trying to atone. For what he was doing deep in the wood.”

Liska hunches lower, knotting her hands together. She remembers the Leszy pressing tea into her hands, remembers him holding her tightly after the battle with the strzygoń. Remembers the proud look in his eyes as he taught Maksio, his petty squabbles with Jaga over the breakfast table.

This was the same man who had lied to her, had intended to *kill* her. Yet he hadn’t. He could have sacrificed her after she unlocked her magic, but he hadn’t. Instead, he’d helped her, he’d trained her, he’d kissed her in a moonlit clearing.

As always, there is a puzzle piece missing, the clockface of mysteries ticking away.

And Liska is determined to find answers.

Kazimiera returns to her bed, and Liska settles back down, determined to get at least a few hours of rest before returning to the House Under the Rowan

Tree. She does not get the chance—the moment she closes her eyes, a loud banging sounds from the door.

Kazimiera bolts to her feet from the bed, cursing as she crosses the room. “Somebody had better be on their deathbed or running from a demon if you’re at my door at six in the—Maksio?”

Liska is on her feet in an instant, tying her hair back as she runs to the door. Sure enough, Maksio is standing in a puddle on the road, freckles stark against his blood-drained face. When he sees Liska, he runs forward and pulls at her shirt.

“What is it?” Kazimiera asks.

From the expression of his eyes and a few brief gestures, Liska understands.

“Something is wrong with the Leszy.”

IN WHICH LISKA SETS THE LESZY ON FIRE

MAKSIO ALLOWS LISKA TO READ his memories once more.

What she sees is a panicked blur of thought and emotion, all of it rippling like a lake during a storm. She sees the Leszy returning to the House Under the Rowan Tree, doubling over in pain in the foyer. Sees Maksio reaching out to help, only for the Leszy to snarl at him to stay back. Hears Jaga demanding where Liska has gone, the Leszy hissing something about the human lands between his teeth. Maksio rushing from the manor all the way to the river, where he melts into the current, traveling with it to the only human place he knows: Wałkowo.

By the time Maksio pulls his hand away, Liska's heart is thumping against her chest. The image of the Leszy's face, twisted in agony, repeats in her mind.

"Let's go," she says to Maksio, looking to Kazimiera apologetically. "I'm sorry to leave so soon, but—"

"I understand," the old czarownik says kindly. "Come, I'll walk you."

Liska follows Maksio out the door, Kazimiera on their heels. As they head toward the town square, Liska notes that Wałkowo seems to be recovering well from the strzygoń attack, with much of the damage from the battle repaired and the streets clear and bright. It's a welcome contrast to the panic and devastation of the previous night, and it lifts her spirits somewhat.

They do not tarry before reaching the spelldoor tree, where Kazimiera bids them both a hasty farewell, patting Maksio's cheek fondly and giving Liska an encouraging, if sorrowful, smile. "Quickly now," she says. "And do not forget what we talked about, Liska."

Then she steps back, giving Liska room to open a spelldoor. Liska swallows nervously, sending up a prayer. She had never tried the spell on her own until last night, and she remembers *that* only through a haze.

Still, magic and panic are a potent combination. As soon as Liska utters the command, a spelldoor snaps open in front of her, revealing a familiar crooked gate and the manor beyond.

Seeing the House Under the Rowan Tree, Liska swallows back a wave of trepidation. She lets Maksio go through first and follows tensely after him, frightening a cluster of sparrows off the manor gate as she shoves it open. She tries to remain cold, efficient, even as she enters the manor. She imagines she is Mama, bringing herbs to treat a feverish farmhand or a child suffering with the pox. She will not be soft. She will not be merciful.

All that vanishes when she lays eyes on the Leszy.

He is sitting on the stairwell, trying to get to his feet as his face contorts with pain. One of his hands cradles the opposite forearm, and he cannot seem to put weight on his right leg. When he sees Liska running toward him, he gives up and slumps against the wall, closing his eyes painfully.

"You came back." She can't tell if the brittleness in his voice is relief or despair. "Why?"

"Because you're a terrible, arrogant, deceitful creature," Liska says, kneeling at his side. "But the wood must have a warden, and you're the only one there is."

With shaking hands, she takes his forearm, prompting a hiss of pain. Even before pushing up his sleeve, she already knows what she will find.

A branch protrudes from his skin. Thick as a snake, it has coiled around his wrist, tight enough to crush the bone beneath. She can see more moving beneath his shirt, reddish blood-sap staining the linen where they break the flesh.

What's wrong with him? Jaga hovers at the Leszy's side as an agitated cloud of woodsmoke.

“Weles,” Liska says. She takes the Leszy’s face with one hand, forcing him to meet her eyes. “Why is he doing this? Why now?”

He shoves her hand off. “Because, my dear fox, I am out of time.”

Out of time. One hundred years are up.

Liska tastes bile at the back of her throat. “How long?”

He laughs horribly, showing blood between his teeth.

“*How long?!*”

“Two days,” he chokes out. “*Two days.* That is why you must go.”

“And what will happen to the Driada?” Liska demands. “If he takes you, what happens?”

“My bargain is fulfilled,” the demon says, chest rising painfully. “I die, and the wood becomes his.”

“It becomes *his*?”

“It was part of what I promised him. A kingdom of his own on earth. He will not be as benevolent as me, surely, but I doubt he will kill many, not when he craves Orlica’s worship.”

“I can’t let that happen. I’ll sooner sacrifice myself than—”

“No! You can’t die, you—” He cries out as a twig bursts through his chest, tearing the fabric of his shirt.

“Your potions,” Liska says, snapping back to the problem at hand. “Where are they?”

He does not answer, clutching his abdomen in obstinate silence.

“Leszy!”

“They are useless now,” he says hoarsely. “Weles is waking, starving for the next sacrifice, and like an animal, that hunger makes him stronger. You must let him take me, not-so-clever fox; there are ways that—”

“No.” Liska cuts him off. “I already told you, you’re not going to die.” She grips his good arm, steadying him. If only there were some spell that could stop this. Unless...

You are sunlight, the Leszy once said to her. You breathe life into everything you touch.

Yes, Liska thinks. *Sunlight can bring life—but it can also burn.*

“I have an idea,” she tells the Leszy. “But it’s risky, and it might hurt.”

He smiles bitterly. “Worst-case scenario, I die—or perhaps that’s the best-case scenario.” He lies back against the staircase, his head resting against a pole of the stair banister. “Go on, then.”

Anxiety coils in Liska’s chest, blue butterflies rising agitatedly from her skin. She calls on the hundreds of candles in the chandelier above, their tiny, flaming souls searing into her. In her mind’s eye, she holds the image of a forest fire, of trees and branches blackening, crumbling, vanishing. However, the birds fly away, the wildlife escapes—the fire harms nothing living.

“*Burn away,*” she whispers.

Then she presses her hands to the Leszy’s chest.

For a moment, it works perfectly. The spell races along Weles’s branches, burning them to ashes with blue flame. To Liska’s relief, it leaves the Leszy’s skin untouched, even as it courses into his body, suffusing his insides in azure light. The Leszy gasps, his back arching, but Liska holds firm.

Then she realizes her mistake.

His heart. Oh, his heart is wood!

“Wait!” she shouts, but it is futile—nothing can stop a spell once it is in motion. She can only watch in horror as the flame reaches the Leszy’s heart.

His eyes widen. His mouth opens as if to scream, but no sound comes out. Then his body slumps to the staircase with a sickening thud.

Liska gasps hoarsely, clutching her hands to her chest. God, what has she done?

Did you kill him? Jaga asks bluntly.

“I don’t know, I—Leszy?” Liska scrabbles over him to find his pulse. “Come on, Leszy, please—”

Her fingers touch his jugular just as his eyes flutter open. He groans, smoke rising from his lips, his nostrils. After a second he sits up, patting his chest. When he finds no branches and no flames, relief washes over his face.

“You might have warned me,” he says weakly.

Liska sniffs, wiping at her eyes. “I said it was risky!”

“You didn’t say you were going to *set me on fire.*”

“I’m sorry,” she says shakily, then allows a wry smile. “I suppose you can consider this penance for your secrets.”

“Then you are a fair confessor,” he says. “Your penance may have just saved my life.”

“What?” Hope swells within her, fragile yet powerful. “How?”

“Your spell. It only hurt the parts of me that are not mortal—the parts that belong to *him*.”

“But your heart...”

“Needs to beat, therefore some part of it is still flesh.” He rubs his chest, wincing. “Though I wager Weles’s share currently resembles a lump of coal.”

Liska makes a sound that is half laugh, half sob. The Leszy reaches out as if to comfort her, then seems to think better of it.

“Clever fox,” he says instead. “You’ve just bought me time.”

“Good.” Liska tilts her chin up, brushing away a stray tear. “Because you have much to explain.”



“The fern flower was always a trick,” the Leszy begins. They are still on the stairs, both of them too exhausted to move more than a few steps. Jaga has vanished, accompanying Maksio to his room, but not before giving the Leszy a glare of undiluted threat.

The demon seems to have taken her warning to heart, because he hardly looks at Liska as he speaks. “I paid minstrels and storytellers to spread the tale far and wide, knowing that only the most desperate or the most greedy would come looking for it. It was the only way I could think of to find sa—” He stumbles over the word. “Sacrifices without leaving the wood.

“I could only conjure the flower one night of the year,” he continues. “It took all my energy to keep the wood’s spirits at bay long enough for humans to reach the manor. I would always test the seekers, ensure they had enough magic to be of use. And when they reached the fern flower, when I heard their wish, I would decide if...”

“If they deserved to die,” Liska finishes.

“No.” He shakes his head. “No one *deserves* to die. But I tried to choose people the world could do without. Traitors, thieves, those with cruelty in their hearts. As magic dwindled, fewer people came to the wood. I couldn’t be so

selective anymore. In the last hundred years, I began to think our kind had all died out. Yes, there were a few desperate, half-drunk idiots who came looking for the flower. But none of them were magical. I began to despair, fearing Weles would finally have his way. But then..."

"Then I came," Liska says.

His throat bobs. "You were different. I tried to keep my distance, but you made that impossible. When I realized your magic was broken, I panicked. It wouldn't be enough to satisfy Weles, not unless I could repair it."

She is too numb to be shocked. "That's why you wanted me to learn magic so badly."

"At first, yes. But... but Liska, you must understand. Part of me always knew I could never let you die. I tried to do what I did with the others: keep my distance, wear the mask, interact only enough to train them in magic before I gave them to Weles. It didn't work—you wouldn't let it. You were always so full of hope, so maddeningly tenacious. And then, oh then. Liska, Liseczka, the worst thing of all happened." His voice cracks, and he looks away. "I fell in love."

The words are fragile things, barely audible, yet they roar in the silence.

"I don't know when it started," he goes on, breathless. "I think it was after I conjured the garden. When you... when you turned and smiled at me. It was like sunlight, like the first warm day after an endless winter." He rubs his hands together. "I had not felt that way since Florian. I became afraid that... that I would lose you like I lost him. So I decided that it was time for me to put an end to all this. I would train you, and hope that you could—" He breaks off, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Could what?"

He hunches over, resting his arms on his knees. "I had a theory," he says, tentative, "about a way to save the Driada."

"What?" She grips his arm. "Why only tell me this now?"

"Because it involves you killing me."

Liska's breath catches. "Then it's out of the question," she says, unable to keep the tremble of emotion from her voice. "We find another way. There *has* to be another way. We have time now; we will think of something."

“You seem peculiarly desperate to save a terrible, arrogant, deceitful creature.” He counts the insults off on his fingers. “Though I don’t deny that is the most concise summary of my character I have ever heard.”

He gives her that disarming smile, and she hates it, hates the way it melts the ice on her skin. She swallows back a quip and does her best to look unimpressed.

“Liska, I am sorry,” he says, his voice turning unexpectedly brittle. “I wanted to tell you about all this, but I held on to the hope that I could come up with another solution, another theory, before my time was up. I thought I could solve it on my own.”

“For God’s sake, Elias,” Liska says sharply. “If you’d told me the truth, I could have helped you long ago instead of trying to gather answers from a ghost hound and a sentient manor.”

Behind her, the stairs give a pointed, extraordinarily annoyed clatter.

“Yes,” the Leszy admits, surprising her. “You’re right. But I was selfish, and I was afraid. I... I know it’s no excuse. But I want you to know that I regret it, and I understand if you never trust me again.”

“Is this an apology?” she asks, eyeing him. “Because it certainly sounds like one.”

He rakes a hand through his hair. “Yes, I suppose it is. If you want it to be more obvious, I could grovel on my knees.”

That makes her face go hot. “Stop. Stop, I’m still angry with you.”

It feels good to laugh, and even better to see him laugh, dimples and all. Then his smile fades, and he takes her hands in his, lowering his head over them as though in prayer. “I wish I could do it over,” he murmurs. “Without secrets, without fear, without the demon between us.”

“You can,” Liska says, and wishes it to be true, prays to God for it. “When this is over, you will have your chance.”

“That may not come to pass,” he says painfully.

Liska’s eyes sting. “Don’t say that.”

“I merely want to prepare you. If... If I do die, I do not want you to mourn. Promise me—”

“Stop.” With sudden frustration, she grabs a fistful of his shirt, pulling him closer. “*Stop that.* You are the most dreadful boy I have ever met, but you are

mine, and you will not be taken by a cantankerous old god.”

His eyebrows tilt up, firelight reflecting in his eyes. “It was always to be my fate.”

“Fate,” she scoffs. “What is fate but an excuse to surrender responsibility? No, Elias, we cannot think of that yet—we must fight to the very end.”



But first they must rest. Liska supports the Leszy, still unsteady on his feet, all the way to his room, then helps him shrug off his outerwear before he half collapses onto his bed. The places on his skin where branches grew are now red, inflamed wounds, some of them fever hot and leaking blood. After some negotiating, Liska convinces him to let her tend to them. “No healing magic,” he says when she asks him for the spell. “Even wounds this small demand a very high toll in energy. They could kill you if you’re not practiced.”

So instead, Liska brings a basin of boiled water and a cloth and begins cleaning the wound on his shoulder. He is silent as she works, lost in thought. When she is done, Liska rummages through his room until she finds bandages and ignores the Leszy’s vehement protests as she wraps the wounds. “Don’t be a child,” she scolds. “They’ll heal more slowly if they get infected.”

He gives in at last, but his posture remains defensive. His eyes are dark and harrowed as he says, “You didn’t tell me how... how you saw Florian.” The words are hesitant, as if he is not sure he wants to know.

Gently, Liska tells him everything that occurred, from stealing his notebook to the moment Florian disappeared. When she is done, she says, “He wanted me to tell you something, but... he faded away before he could finish.”

To her surprise, the Leszy snorts. “That’s suitably dramatic of him. He always loved theatrics—the man could quote twenty plays off the top of his head, and not the interesting kind.”

Liska scowls at his deflection. “Don’t you want to know what he said?”

“I am sure it was something simultaneously witty and wise.” He lifts his arm reluctantly as she moves on to the wound on his ribs. “It’s... it’s enough to know that he thought of me. That he isn’t angry, even though we’d argued that night. I always regretted that.”

There is much grief in his words, grief that has gone neglected. Perhaps now that Florian is well and truly gone, the Leszy will finally let himself mourn. She will talk to him about it if—no, *when*—they get the chance. Once this is all over and he is saved, they will have all the time in the world.

Liska rubs her eyes, recognizing the same wrung-out tiredness in the Leszy's expression. "We need to sleep," she says. She makes to rise, but he catches her hand, draws it beseechingly to his chest. His heart beats, too slow but steady and achingly *alive*, beneath her palm.

"Stay with me."

"I—"

"Weles is subdued—this could be our only chance." His chest swells beneath her hands as he inhales. "I do not know how many nights I have left, Liska Radost, and I would very much like to spend this one with you."

Liska does not refuse. He is a demon, and he has done monstrous things, but he makes her feel whole. Perhaps that, more than anything, is what got them here—a boy who loves too little and a girl who loves too much, two threads tangled on the loom of history.

It is simple, and then it is not. She kisses him, he kisses back, and then *oh*... there is so much more. There are greedy touches and tense muscles and tangled limbs and pieces that fit perfectly together. They breathe the same breaths and share the same soul, fern-green magic and periwinkle-blue glowing gloriously around them until they inevitably unravel.

In the end, they do not sleep much at all.



Liska wakes up in the Leszy's embrace. For a moment that is all there is: him, and her. One of his arms is curled protectively around her shoulders, the other pillowing her head. His eyelashes spill silvery shadows across his cheekbones, and his mouth tilts up in the blissful memory of a smile.

She shuffles back carefully, just enough to prop herself up on her elbow, to look down at him and resist the urge to trace her fingers over the proud lines of his face. Melancholy settles over her like a swath of silk. Monsters and

monstrosity, death and destruction, yet she loves him still. Does this make her a fool? Does this make her a sinner?

Maybe that is what others would call her. But she knows herself, and she knows him, for better or for worse. For the first time in her life, she is assured in her choices.

“Still, I don’t think I could ever bring you home,” Liska remarks. “Mama would march us directly to Father Paweł for exorcisms.”

Exorcisms. The idea arrives with sudden, glaring clarity. Liska bolts upright. She moves to wake the Leszy and hesitates, hating herself for ruining the peaceful moment. Then she remembers what the Leszy said hours ago: *I do not know how many nights I have left.*

She presses her palm to his shoulder and shakes, gentle but firm.

“Mm-hmm.” He opens one eye sleepily, catlike. “What is it?”

She brushes a kiss over the mole under his eye, wishing they could stay like this forever. Then she delivers the news.

“I—I think I know how we can defeat Weles.”



“An exorcism.” The Leszy folds his hands on the breakfast table, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Not exactly.” Energy sings through Liska’s veins. “Something similar. After all, exorcisms are just rituals to cast out demons, no?”

“If they’re performed on someone who’s actually possessed, and not some poor hapless man with a drinking problem,” the Leszy says. “Besides, they only work on the weakest demons. Anything stronger, you need to use actual magic.”

“Which you’ve done, haven’t you? You’ve cast out demons before.”

“Yes, common ones like bies or lichó, whose tricks and weaknesses I have had centuries to learn. But we’re talking about an old god here, the most powerful sort of demon.”

“How complicated can it be?” Liska gestures as she speaks. “He’s just another foreign body within you, like a poison, or—or a splinter. Why can’t we draw him out, like with the strzygoń’s poison in Wałkowo?”

He tilts his head. “You want to use the soul-searching spell?”

“Yes!” She puts up a hand before he can protest. “I know he’s powerful! I know. But what if we weakened him first? I could burn him again—”

“You won’t get another chance. You caught him by surprise last night, and he was only giving me a warning. That was nowhere near his full strength. If it had been, your spell would have barely inconvenienced him.”

She doesn’t let up. “So we inconvenience him *more*. That’s why I mentioned exorcisms. Because they use hallowed objects—holy water, relics, crosses—to force out demons.”

“Yes, but—”

“So we do the spell on hallowed ground. I know a priest—if we could convince him to say an exorcism, it could be enough to loosen Weles’s grip on you. Then I could go into your soul and force him out with magic. I’ve already done it once,” she reminds him.

“You think I haven’t tried that before?” the Leszy says. “You think in seven hundred years, I have not tried breaking my bargain in every way possible? Liska, I have done it all. Spells, potions, rituals. Once, in drunken anger, I took my sword to the totem in that temple. But that place is where Weles is strongest, and I did not even manage to make a dent before he surged up within me and took control of my limbs. I woke up back in the manor, my own sword embedded in the palm of my hand.”

Liska flinches, flexing her own hand inadvertently, imagining the horror of such an awakening. “Eliasz...” She trails off, her determination shaken for the first time that day.

The Leszy gives her a rueful smile. “Ah, my dear fox. I admire your optimism, truly I do. But nothing has changed since then.”

Behind them, someone makes an indignant sound. They turn to see Maksio at the door, looking as though he has been there for a while. Glaring pointedly, he gestures to himself, then to Liska.

“He’s right,” Liska agrees as a plan solidifies in her mind. “Something *has* changed. This time you have us.”

STODOŁA

IN THE END THE PLAN is simple, requiring very little in the way of preparation. There is just one rather vital thing still missing from the exorcism: a priest. Unfortunately, that means Liska must do something she is not prepared for.

She is going back to Stodoła.

And this time she is taking the Leszy with her.

Not just the Leszy, either, but Maksio as well—he is a vital part of their plan, and she doubts he would stay behind even if he were not. They do not bring much with them, only their weapons and one of the Leszy’s spellbooks. Moments before they leave, the Leszy stops Liska in the hallway.

“Are you all right?”

She must look dreadfully nervous if the Leszy has noticed. Though she knows she cannot fool him, she still forces a smile. “Why wouldn’t I be? I’m going home.”

She turns away before he can see through the lie. Frankly, she is terrified. She has been gone from home for nearly four months. Though their plan minimizes the risk that they will be seen—they will arrive before sunrise, while the villagers still sleep, and go straight to the chapel—she will still be returning to the place she fled in anguish, a place that holds the memories of her entire life, joyful and terrible both. And the Leszy and Maksio will be there. They will see all of it. What will they think?

Worse, what will Father Paweł think? She does not know what they will do if the priest turns them away, or worse, betrays their presence to the rest of the

village. Or—or what if someone sees them? What if the spell goes wrong, and Weles does something terrible? God, there are so many ways her plan could go awry.

Jaga sees them off in the entry hall. In the form of a cat, she is tense, her hair standing on end and her tail flicking back and forth agitatedly. She is worried, in her peculiar Jaga way. Liska's heart clenches—there is a resigned finality in the skrzat's eyes, as if she is not certain that they will return.

“We'll be all right,” Liska tells her, though she is not sure if she believes it.

Jaga shrugs one shoulder. *You may be, you may not. What happens out there is none of my business. I am a house-spirit, nothing more.*

It's a feigned nonchalance, but Liska does not address it. Instead, she says, “There is something I should tell you.”

Oh?

“I know how you died. That sketchbook... it was yours. That girl in the drawing was you.” A dark-eyed girl, talented in sketching, cast aside when her fiancée chose another. Who had, in her desperation, sought the fern flower. Put her faith in myths, like so many before her.

Jaga studies Liska carefully, then flicks an ear. *Do you know how to free a spirit bound to the mortal world?* When Liska doesn't reply, she says, *You give it closure. I do not want that, girl, not yet. I have no interest in leaving this plane. The three of you are far too entertaining.*

It is the closest thing to affection the house-spirit has ever admitted. Liska wants to say something—a thank-you, a farewell—but Jaga does not give her the chance. She simply blinks her ink-black eyes and vanishes in a puff of smoke.

Liska's stomach twinges uneasily as she joins the Leszy and Maksio. She is once again dressed in strój, but this time Onegdaj is sheathed at her belt, and her hair is bound back in a single messy braid. The Leszy wears his pale sukmana and dark trousers, his sword at his hip. Maksio is dressed in a combination of the Leszy's and scavenged clothing in an attempt to look as modern—and as normal—as possible.

Still, they cannot completely hide their strangeness, and there is certainly no hiding the Leszy's antlers. If they are seen, there will be trouble.

Sensing her unease, the Leszy slips his hand into hers. A moment later, Maksio takes the other one, giving her a smile.

For that brief second of comfort, Liska lets herself believe everything will be all right.



The spelldoor opens upon the ragged bark of the elm that overlooks the communal pasture. Ahead, a flock of muddy goats searches the earth for scraps of grass while the thatched roofs of Stodoła slump against a slate-gray sky. There are no stars in sight—only the wan face of the moon, trapped in the jaws of canine-sharp clouds.

The three of them approach silently. The Leszy takes the lead, striding with purpose, while Maksio hangs back nervously, glancing from Liska to the village, then back again. He does not let go of her hand. Liska’s heart pounds in her ears, her stomach feeling like it is wrapped up in a dozen knots that tighten with every step. The closer they get, the more memories come flooding back—the Kupala bonfire blazing, the bellow of accordion music and uproarious laughter as she slips into the dark, away from her people, her home. She feared she would die that night.

She didn’t. And now she is back, and she is alive, and she is very much everything she was taught to fear. Witch, czarownik, warden-in-training. Suddenly ashamed, she ducks her head, unable to look straight at the village. Even at this distance, she can imagine Mama’s disapproving scowl and the beady eyes of Pani Prawota on her back, scrutinizing her every move for proof that she has magic.

Something heavy falls around her back, startling her out of her thoughts. The Leszy has laid his sukmana over her shoulders.

“You’re trembling,” he says quietly.

Liska pulls the coat closer around herself and says nothing. *Focus, Liska*, she tells herself. *You cannot falter now.*

They have to defeat Weles and save the Leszy. Every minute that passes is another minute Weles may awaken again, and this time Liska will be powerless to stop him.

They enter the village as a gradient of lighter blue dashes across the horizon. The dirt path is wet and slippery beneath their feet, smeared with cart-wheel grooves and footprints and horse droppings. The cold wind stings Liska's nose, carrying a familiar scent—chimney smoke and baking bread and manure, the discordant perfume of village life.

That is Pani Młynarczyk's house, Liska's mind whispers unhelpfully as her eyes land on the nearest homestead. *She served you the most delicious bigos that time you saved her favorite goat from fever.*

Liska shoves the voice away. Is she imagining it, or are the homes and hovels drawing closer, stifling her, looming over her like a wordless tribunal? She digs her nails into her palms and buries herself deeper into the Leszy's coat. *Almost there.* They are not far now from the chapel—its single steeple towers above, dark shingles and a wooden cross emerging like beacons through the haze.

But first, oh God—first there is her house.

There are the creaking wooden steps she played upon as a child, the periwinkles Tata painted for her over the doorframe, the adjacent barn where Stara and the old goat are shut away for the night. There is the narrow garden where Mama's herbs grow in the summer, the rusty iron pot where she leaves soaked bread and scraps for the chickens, the window to Liska's room where pigeons often gather.

And there, with her head over the barn's half door, is trusty old Stara, gone pure white with age. The mare looks up, surveying them with clever eyes. Liska's heart stops.

“Stara, no—”

Too late.

Stara wickers in greeting—a sound reserved for Tata and Liska, and no one else.

Liska clutches the Leszy's arm. “We need to go, before—”

Footsteps. The familiar screech of the front door. The orange glow of a lantern held high.

“Hello?”

Mama.

Liska is frozen—she does not want to turn around.

“Mother of God,” Dobrawa Radost whispers. “Liska?”

“No to the first, yes to the second,” the Leszy replies, debonair. “Perhaps we should come inside?”



Dobrawa Radost serves them tea from a brightly painted porcelain teapot—a family heirloom cracked by six-year-old Liska in one of her first magical tantrums—and stands before them straight as a silver birch, not a hair out of place, her brown skirt free of wrinkles and apron unstained. Her expression is perfectly controlled, but the look in her eyes makes Liska think of bottled lightning.

“I mourned you, Liska,” Mama begins matter-of-factly. “When you did not return for weeks, I began to suspect you had not survived. Idiot girl, running off in search of fairy tales, leaving nothing but a letter. Did you even stop and think what your disappearance would do to me? And now you show up on my doorstep with a strange boy and an *antlered* man—”

“Eliasz Kowal,” the Leszy corrects her. There is a bundle of dried lemon balm hanging above him, and he keeps trying to untangle it from his antlers. “And the boy is Maksio, since you neglected to ask.”

“Pan Kowal,” Mama says begrudgingly. “And what exactly is your occupation, Panie?”

“Oh.” The Leszy’s eyes are green flames. “I protect Orlica from demons and spirits and all the horrible things that you have been told aren’t real, so your nightmares remain just those: nightmares.”

Mama’s lips thin, and Liska kicks the Leszy under the table. *This is not the time to be awful*, she wants to tell him, but her heart is pounding so fast, she cannot formulate words.

“And you.” Mama’s steely gaze whips back to Liska, pinning her like a butterfly to a plate. “I had everything arranged for you. You would have had a proper job, been safe and secure in the city. What possessed you to run away?”

Liska looks down at her hands.

“She didn’t run away,” the Leszy cuts in, his voice once again the charismatic, silken timbre she’d heard that first night in the Driada. “She sought me out so

she could train as a czarownik. No, there is no point reaching for that cross; I am not a demon, and she is not a witch. But she is powerful in magic, and likely the last of her kind.”

Mama’s eyes are narrowed to slits. “I find it hard to believe, Panie Kowal, that my daughter would be so foolish as to *voluntarily* use magic. Obviously you coerced her with some demonic spell, and you will now remove it from her, before I—”

The Leszy cocks his head. “Before you what, exactly?”

Maksio makes a nervous sound in the back of his throat, looking from Leszy to Mama to Leszy again. Liska draws him closer protectively and searches the room, looking for a way to stop the brewing storm. Seeing no other solutions, she reaches out and nudges at her mug. It falls over, splashing steaming tea across the lace tablecloth. She makes a show of scrambling to pick it up.

“*Oj*, sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“How many times must I tell you to be careful, Liska?” Mama’s tone becomes exasperated. “I see you haven’t changed a bit.”

Well, at least everyone is now glaring at *her*. Better this than the Leszy and her mother at each other’s throats. Taking a gulping breath, Liska rights the mug and waves her hand over the spilled tea, a glowing butterfly leaping from her palm. A murmured spell, and the tea peels itself away from the tablecloth, returning to the mug in a glistening stream.

Mama stares.

Maksio grins.

The Leszy’s eyes glitter with impish pride.

“Uh,” Liska says. “That’s something the Lesz—Eliasz taught me. I...” She tries to meet her mother’s eyes, fails miserably. “I can control it now. You don’t have to be afraid.”

Mama shifts. “I’m not afraid of—”

“*For* me. Not of me,” Liska says pointedly, tilting up her chin. “You don’t have to be afraid *for* me. Because... you’ve always wanted what’s best for me, correct? That’s why you told me to suppress my magic instead of seeking out someone to help me. That’s why you never trusted me to aid you with healing, why you forced me to become a subdued village girl adequate for marrying off.

Because you loved me. Not because you think Tata's death was my fault. *Correct?*"

"Liska." Mama's voice is rife with horror. "What are you saying?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Liska is on her feet, though she does not remember standing. "Why didn't you tell me what happened that day?"

"I was trying to protect you!" Mama is shouting. Mama *never* shouts. "And yes, maybe I was afraid of the ungainly daughter who'd killed my husband, and I vowed to stop you from ever hurting anyone again. But it was for your own good!"

"To stop me from..." Liska cuts off in a bitter laugh. "I'm not a rabid dog, Mama. I'm your *daughter*. Yet you acted like I was a monster, and I *believed* it. I did everything to please you—I cut away every piece of myself you disliked, tried to mold myself into the perfect daughter, but even then, even *then*—" Her voice cracks. "Even then, you didn't trust me."

"I couldn't," Dobrawa says hoarsely. "If I did, if I let down my guard, you would have done something foolish and doomed yourself. Just like you are doing now." She takes a wavering step back, leans her knuckles on the sink. She looks... *spent*. "You *are* my daughter, Liska. My only daughter. I have done my best to love you despite your faults. For Bogdan—I swear it, I have done my best."

"If you had done your best, you would have stood by my side instead of trying to send me away. You would have defended me if it came to that."

Mama stares at her. "I arranged everything for you. You could have had a good life."

"I wouldn't have even known if it was good, Mama," Liska whispers. "I didn't know who I was or what I liked, because you never let me be anything but the obedient, unremarkable daughter."

"Better unremarkable than damned," Mama says, in a voice so quiet that Liska wonders if she meant to say it out loud.

Intentional or not, the words cut Liska to the quick. "I'm not wicked, Mama."

Something flickers in Dobrawa's eyes. Some thread of fondness, the remnants of the doting mother she once was, before her husband died and she was left

alone. “I know.” The words are still sharp, but they are tempered with regret. She closes her eyes, blows out a long, wavering breath. When she looks back, she is once again impeccably composed.

“Why have the three of you come here?”

Liska hesitates. Then, hastily, she explains, in as little detail as possible. They need a priest, she says, to help with a spell that will destroy a waking wood-demon and save the Driada.

Dobrawa nods, matter-of-fact. “Then I will come to Father Paweł with you. I have his trust—if I vouch for you, then he will help. But when this is done, Liska, you must leave. And you cannot speak to anyone of what you have become.”

What you have become. Even now, after Liska has proved she can control her magic, Mama still thinks she is a monster. She knows, with unexpected, jagged certainty, that no matter what she did, she would have never truly belonged in Stodoła.

“Thank you, Pani Radost.” It is the Leszy who speaks, cutting through the crackling tension in the room. He rises elegantly, putting a protective hand on the small of Liska’s back. “Though in the future, I would advise you not to shout in front of guests—especially children.” He nods to Maksio, who is glaring at Dobrawa with uncharacteristic fire. “It simply isn’t proper.”

A vein bulges on Dobrawa’s temple. Stiffly, she walks to the door and yanks it open, gesturing into the late-autumn dawn. “Come quick. The other villagers are beginning to wake, and I want you gone before you cause any more trouble.”

THE TRICK TO A GOOD EXORCISM

THE CHURCH OF SAINT JERZY has always intimidated Liska. It is not a rational fear—the chapel is not particularly large, nor is it very beautiful. It is simply serviceable, with sturdy walls, a rib-vaulted ceiling, and fourteen wooden icons depicting the stations of the cross. What unsettles her is the *quiet*: the cavernous silence like a held breath that amplifies the smallest noise—be it a scuff of the foot or a suppressed snuffle—into a resonance like a thunderclap. As a girl, Liska would play games with the silence; she would come to the chapel when it was empty and sit in the very first pew, humming her favorite melodies. She would close her eyes and imagine that the echoes of her song were the voices of angels singing in harmony.

That was before she learned that God did not approve of magic, and thus did not approve of *her*. After that, the silence became a taut, watchful thing—as though at any moment, a voice might shatter through the heavens and declare Liska unworthy.

When she steps into the chapel now, she half expects to hear that very voice.

Father Paweł is kneeling before the altar, a breviary in his hand. He cuts off as they enter, turning with a look of mildly irritated benevolence that quickly morphs into shock.

“Dobrawa? What... who...?”

Liska plasters on an apologetic smile. “Praised be God.” The traditional greeting feels alien on her lips.

“Forever and ever amen.” Father Paweł rises tensely to his feet, looking over each of them with the steadiness of a man who has become habituated to the strangeness of border-village life. Then, to her surprise, he dips his head to the Leszy. “Panie Leszy.”

Liska gapes at them. “You know each other?”

“We met once, when I first arrived.” Paweł closes the breviary, drumming his fingers on the worn cover. “He appeared to me in the fields one morning and warned me of the dangers of the wood. I thought he was an apparition.”

“I gave him one of my sentinels,” the Leszy says. “I try to leave one with the head of every border village, but the wójt was... less willing to listen.” He rubs absentmindedly at his shoulder, and Liska remembers the circular white scar there. *My first bullet wound*, he’d whispered in a voice soothing as a mountain stream, as he’d run his hands up her spine and lowered his mouth to...

God, is she really going to remember this now? In *church*? She forces herself to focus back on the conversation.

“Why have you all come here?” Father Paweł is asking.

“You promised me once that if I ever needed help, I could come to you,” Liska replies. “Well, there is a demon possessing the Leszy, and he needs to be banished.”

The priest’s eyes widen in disbelief. “A demon possessing him,” he repeats slowly. “Did you witches not have spells to deal with such things, once upon a time?”

“This is no simple spirit,” the Leszy says somberly. “Nor is he a higher demon. He is an old god, a primordial being of the earth. I made a bargain with him long ago, when I was young and foolish.”

That darkens the mood considerably. Father Paweł grips the wooden cross hung from a cord around his neck. “I have heard of old gods,” he admits. “We spoke of them briefly at the seminary, but only in the context of pagan beliefs, never as something that... that was *real*. If this is true...”

“It is,” the Leszy says, and his tone leaves no room for doubt.

Paweł looks to the sky, muttering a prayer. For a moment Liska is afraid he will turn them away, but when he looks back, he gives them a strained smile. “I do not like it,” he says. “But I came to this parish knowing I would deal with more demons than most. I will help you, Panie Leszy, but I can only do so if you repent for your sins.”

“Father, if only you knew.” The Leszy’s face looks hollowed in the dawning light. Before he can say more, Dobrawa steps up to Liska, seizing her wrist in a grip of iron.

“Before we continue,” she says, “I need to know. Do you truly trust this monster, Liska?”

That is too much. Liska meets her mother’s eyes sharply. “He saved my life. He saves all our lives, every day, and he has sacrificed *everything* for it, including his heart. And if we don’t get it back as soon as possible, it’s going to kill him. Then the Driada will no longer have a warden, and you will find out what monsters truly look like.”

“*Liska*,” the Leszy whispers, a mixture of shock and gratitude pooling in his eyes. Liska brushes her hand against his, her nerves loosening just a little. She never expected speaking her mind to be so cathartic.

Maksio knocks on a pew, the wooden *thump* claiming their attention. Liska scolds herself mentally—she has forgotten that despite his youthful appearance, Maksio is still a demon, and they have brought him into a church, onto holy ground. He looks vaguely uncomfortable, stepping from foot to foot as he raises his notebook: *We should hurry. This place makes demons agitated. It might wake Weles faster.*

“And who are you, young man?” Father Paweł inquires of him.

“He’s here to help,” Liska says quickly. “He has magic as well, but it manifests in his voice.”

Father Paweł looks beyond distrustful, but to her relief he does not question Maksio further. He simply crosses his arms and says, “Very well. Tell me what you need.”

Liska explains her plan as best as she can, including all their roles—Father Paweł’s in weakening the demon and Liska’s in forcing him out. Maksio, in the meantime, is to use his song to keep Weles in a trance. Dobrawa listens from a

distance, face pinched in disapproval. When all is spoken of, Father Paweł vanishes into the sacristy to prepare, and the Leszy draws Liska to the side, where a stained-glass window shatters morning light into a kaleidoscope across the notched floor.

“Liska, listen,” he says urgently. “If anything goes wrong, if Weles becomes too powerful, the only way to stop him will be to destroy the part in me where he resides: my heart.”

“Leszy—”

“Promise me, not-so-clever fox. If this doesn’t work, promise you’ll kill me.”

She swallows. Fear burns in her chest, caustic and unrelenting. She wants to say no, wants to scream that it isn’t fair, that she shouldn’t have to kill the man she loves. But she doesn’t.

Instead, she nods.

His shoulders loosen in relief. “Remember.” He takes her hand and presses it to the spot he showed her once in training—the space between his ribs where she can slide a dagger into his heart. “Here. Yes?”

She nods again, and then, because she does not know if she will get another chance, she whispers, “I love you.”

He pulls her close, into the safety of his arms. He smells of pine sap and pouring rain and ancient things, of the manor’s dusty corridors and of old books and of magic. He smells of home.

“I...,” he says. She hears his breath catch in his chest, and for a moment she is afraid he won’t say it. But he does.

“I love you too, Liska Radost.”



Ten minutes later, they all stand upon the chancel. Father Paweł makes the sign of the cross and presses his palm to the Leszy’s forehead. The Leszy towers over him; when he ducks his head respectfully, his antlers cast long shadows across the floor. A few paces away, Liska bites her lip, the cool wetness of holy water—Paweł tried sprinkling all of them, though Maksio ducked away—still drying on her forehead. As the priest whispers prayer after prayer, she listens, catching words appealing to God for help and demanding that the demon leave the

Leszy's body. When he is done, he traces a cross on the Leszy's forehead and steps away.

Seconds tick by. *One, two, three.*

The Leszy opens his eyes, looking over at Liska, then Maksio.

"Do you feel anything?" Liska asks with trepidation.

"Awake."

The voice comes from the Leszy's mouth, but it does not belong to him—it is the voice of crafty bargains and forbidden histories and abandoned temples to pagan gods.

Weles.

Weles-Leszy cracks his neck casually. "Nothing to rouse you like the burn of holy water. Thank you for that, Father."

He lunges for the priest's throat.

Liska draws Onegdaj, but Maksio is faster. He opens his mouth and *screams*.

How a scream can be simultaneously ear-shattering and melodious, Liska can only guess. But within that short sound is an entire song, a song that soothes the soul and softens the mind and says, *come to me come to me come to me*. Weles snarls through the Leszy's lips, but even he cannot resist. He turns toward Maksio, stepping forward with drawn-out, slackened movements.

Liska does not wait. She claps her hands together and draws them apart, butterflies gathering between her palms in a furious blue flock. Then she grabs the Leszy's face in her hands and pours the magic into him.

When Liska had looked within her own soul the night the Leszy had searched for her magic, it felt like drifting through the cosmos. It had been a vast, serene emptiness that held memories glowing like stars, each a short glimpse into her own past.

The Leszy's soul is nothing like that.

Everywhere she turns, there are roots. Roots of cracked, rotten obsidian that curl and coil through the space, turning the stars they touch into blackened mold. Like parasitic mistletoe, Weles has begun to consume the Leszy. He has not reached everything, not yet—Liska can sense the parts of the czarownik that remain free, the parts that the roots cannot reach until Weles has regained his full strength.

“Why are you doing this?” Liska half sobs, though she knows she cannot expect sympathy, cannot even *reason* with a demon.

One hundred years are over, Weles croons in reply. He is mine.

“Not anymore,” Liska growls. “Not while I draw breath.”

And, just like she did on the stairwell of the manor, she sets the roots on fire.

Spells, the *Czarologia* explains, require energy. That is the price that a czarownik pays to shape another soul, to mold it into something new. But within the soul of another, Liska finds the same rules do not apply. There is another source of power, the fuel of a soul, upon which she can draw. Memories. Emotions. And those that remain uncorrupted, the ones the Leszy clings to the tightest, are memories of *her*.



Liska in the newly enchanted garden, graceful as she twirls, wild curls highlighted by a fistful of golden sunlight. She turns to him, eyes full of wonder, and smiles. (Smiles! At a demon! The girl must be very stupid or very brave. Likely both.)



Liska, washing her face after a sparring session, well water glittering like starlight as it drips down her face. Her eyes are wide and blue as the sky. (He does not find her beautiful, he does not. What an absurd idea!)



Liska, lying on a bed in Kazimiera’s stifling hovel, pallid from blood loss with three vicious scars across her shoulder. She looks ferocious, unstoppable, far gone from the timid little thing he first saw in the wood. She almost died on him—he was terrified. It has been so long since he felt terrified that it’s almost refreshing.



Liska and Maksio and Jaga sitting with him in the parlor on a rare quiet evening. Maksio is winning at chess yet again, Liska is laughing at the Leszy’s unamused expression (does his face really look that funny?), and Jaga is watching it all with the lazy contentment of a spirit who knows far more than she should. (He still does

not know why he lets any of them stay. They are insufferable and nosy and agents of rampant chaos. Yet when he is around them, he feels as if he is full of firelight: warm and bright and... and dreadfully poetic, apparently.)



Liska, ducking under the waterfall in the pool, water sluicing off her bare back, soaking those luxurious curls he has longed to run his fingers through. She is beautiful, and he is going to die for her. For all of them.

Liska and Maksio and Jaga and the House Under the Rowan Tree. (A pity his heroic sacrifice will go unappreciated. It should have been worthy of one tragic ballad, at least.)



And then the last memory comes to her: this one shy and unwilling but the brightest star of all. She cradles it protectively to her chest as it engulfs her.



Liska, pushing him down onto his bed, hands hungry and commanding as they rake through his hair, tighten around his antlers. Desire courses through him, an irresistible riptide. She looks storm-tossed with her undone curls frizzy from the rain, those periwinkle eyes filled with thousands of emotions, each a universe he would like to explore if he had the time. But he does not. He only has this, and he will live for every second of it.

(Of women, he's heard it said: "She will be the end of me," or "She will be my undoing." None of that is true for Liska Radost. She is not the end of anything, but the beginning of everything. He has been dead a long time, and she is his resurrection.)



Liska realizes, in that moment, that she has misjudged herself. Through the Leszy's eyes, she has seen something in herself that she could have never believed otherwise: strength, tenacity, kindness. In his eyes, she is ever-changing, different with every dawn but no less sincere. She is not defined by her magic, for better or

for worse. She does not need to prove herself to him or to anyone else. She is simply... enough.

She has *always* been enough.

It is this discovery, more than anything, that brings Liska to life. Surging with power, she burns and burns and *burns*, searing roots away from the Leszy tendril by tendril.

What are you doing? the demon shrieks. *Where did you get this power?*

His roots begin to weaken. Some thrash and retreat, some are reduced to ashes. Liska does not stop, her fire coursing further and further. Toward the Leszy's heart, where the roots originate, tangling into one great trunk that pulses with power. Weles's soul. All she needs to do is burn it all down.

She pauses, gathering power, feeding on her own love, which has always blazed so strongly. Not just what she feels for the Leszy, but what she feels for Maksio and Jaga and Mama and the House Under the Rowan Tree. She has always thought herself foolish for loving so much and so easily. Yet now it is her strength.

She unleashes it like a shock wave, a great ball of flame that collides with Weles's core.

A shudder runs through the demon, roots and branches disintegrating from the impact. Then silence. For a moment there is naught but remnant embers and weakened stars.

Then the demon begins to laugh.

An impressive display, truly. His voice is equal parts vicious and victorious. *You nearly had me, but unfortunately, it simply was not enough. Still, do not despair, little mouse. I am an old god. There was never really anything you could do.*

A powerful root, thick as a trunk, erupts from the darkness. For a single, tense heartbeat, it wavers over Liska.

Then it plunges into her chest.

A CLEVER FOX

LISKA WAKES UP VIOLENTLY, HANDS scrabbling for her aching chest, expecting to find a great wound where the root pierced her.

There is nothing, not even a mark.

Around her, the chapel has become a tableau of pure horror.

On the chancel, the Leszy collapses to his knees, his back arching in agony as bark erupts across his skin like plague pustules, thickening his muscles and lengthening his limbs until his clothing begins to tear. His antlers writhe like living things, growing leaves and shedding them again, while lichen corrodes his skin. Branches sprout from his shoulders and elbows with gruesome spurts of sap and flesh.

Weles is killing him, claiming his prize.

Liska looks around frantically, trying to locate all her companions. Father Paweł has a protective arm in front of Maksio as they both crawl behind the altar. Dobrawa stands in the aisle, white as paper. Despite the fear evident in her posture, her gaze is calculating. Her eyes fix on Liska, then go to Maksio and Father Paweł. She may hate magic, but Liska knows Mama loves the village as much as she does. If it is under threat, then Dobrawa Radost will not stand down.

A moan escapes the Leszy's lips, guttural and inhuman, a wounded animal. Without thinking, Liska runs to him, reaching for his face, his arms, magic fluttering at her skin as she prepares to cast the fire spell again—a hopeless attempt at burning away Weles's corruption.

Before she can touch him, the Leszy snatches her wrist, his grip strong enough to bruise. His eyes snap open. They are tortured, brittle, but they are still *his* eyes. And they are pleading.

He moves her hand until her palm is pressed to his chest, to the fatal spot between his ribs.

“Kill me,” he whispers hoarsely. “Before he takes over.”

But Liska cannot bring herself to draw the knife.

The Leszy’s eyelids flutter closed. When they open again, they blaze with white flame. *Weles’s eyes*. His grip on her wrist tightens, brutal now.

“You really thought I would kill him?” the demon sneers. “You really think I would wait seven hundred years, feeding on pathetic scraps, only to kill such a promising vessel?” His fingers on her wrist clench even tighter—any more, and they will break bone. “There are only so many czarownik strong enough to host an old god. I knew I would have to play the long game. But I have it at last: his life and his magic, given voluntarily when he bargained them away. And now I am free to walk the mortal plane.”

Liska’s blood turns to ice. Weles is possessing the Leszy, claiming the czarownik’s body as his own at last. With all that power at his disposal, there is no telling what the demon will do.

She has to stop him. She was so close to banishing him, *so close*. Her hand is still touching him—all she has to do is reach out...

“Absolutely not.”

He releases Liska’s wrist and shoves her, hard—so hard that her feet leave the ground, and the back of her head slams against the wooden lectern. Light bursts before her eyes; pain courses down her spine. Apparently satisfied with his handiwork, Weles turns away and marches into the aisle. He has nothing of the Leszy’s elegance or poise—he is all jerky motions and assured purpose.

And he is headed right for Mama.

“Mama, run!” Liska gasps. There is a basin of holy water by the door—Liska draws on it almost thoughtlessly, her mind forming the barest idea of a spell.

“*Protect.*”

Water erupts from the basin. It rockets toward Dobra and gathers in front of her, expanding from floor to ceiling just as Weles pulls his arm back, readying

to strike her down.

His fist meets ice.

Growling, he draws back again, his fingers lengthening into branch-like talons. They cut grooves in the ice wall, to little effect. Meanwhile, Liska readies a second spell using the floor beneath them. Wood is always more stubborn than water, but Liska is stubborn too—she wrestles the soul of the hardwood flooring into cooperation.

“*Become a wall,*” she tells it, and it does—the floor curls up, breaking away from the chapel’s foundation, rising up behind Weles to trap him. From one side, ice; from the other side, wood. A cage of magic.

It will not last long.

Liska gets to her feet, praying Mama made it out of the chapel, and stumbles toward Father Paweł and Maksio. Only in motion does she realize how much energy she has spent—her limbs feel as if they are made of lead; her joints scream in protest. When she trips and crumples to her knees, hair falls in front of her face; she could swear the streak of white in her hair has gotten thicker.

“Liska.” Father Paweł grabs her arm and hauls her behind the altar. “Liska, what is happening?”

“I made a terrible mistake,” she whispers weakly. “I tried to weaken him, but I only made him stronger.” She forces herself to her feet, hauls Maksio up with her. “Maksio,” she says. “How many people can you influence with your song?”

He holds up all his fingers, closes his hands then opens them again. *Many.*

“Then go with my mother and Father Paweł to the village. Get everyone to barricade their doors and hide in the safest places in their homes—with weapons, if they can. Father, once the way is clear, take a horse and ride for Gwiazdno. Tell them whatever they need to hear to convince the militia to come.”

Behind them, there is the sound of splintering wood. Liska looks over the altar to see Weles’s talons shatter the hardwood wall.

“We have to go!” she gasps.

“Wait,” Father Paweł says. “What do we do about that *thing*?”

“I have a plan,” Liska says, giving a confident—and very fake—smile. She does not have a *plan*—what she has is a foolish theory, but that is all she ever

really has.

“Father,” she asks, “do you have any matches?”

“In the sacristy,” he says, too frightened to be confused.

“Good.” Liska gets to her feet. “Then let’s go.”

It is time for the not-so-clever fox to test her mettle.



They bolt out of the sacristy side door into the brisk morning air. Just in time, because a horrible screeching noise echoes from inside the chapel, accompanied by a sound like shattering glass. *That will be the ice wall*, Liska thinks. She catches glimpses of villagers peering out from their homes, despite Mama gesturing for them to stay back.

Shame pricks Liska’s cheeks. There is no hiding now—everyone will soon know she has magic. Pani Prawota will certainly feel vindicated.

Another splintering sound. Perhaps the pews being overturned.

Liska turns her attention back to Maksio and Father Paweł. “Go now!” she shouts.

Maksio hesitates, looking at her worriedly. She ducks and presses a kiss to his forehead.

“Trust me,” she whispers, and prays to God she does not break that trust. Then she glances towards her mother. “Look after him, Mama, please.”

Dobrawa hesitates, clearly remembering the way Maksio had screamed in the chapel, realizing he is no ordinary boy. But eventually, something wins her over—perhaps her healer’s nature, perhaps Maksio’s wide-eyed, panicked gaze. She nods brusquely and takes the boy’s hand. Father Paweł rushes to join them, and they set off into the village. Liska, in the meantime, gathers up whatever pathetic shards of confidence she has left and strides purposefully for the chapel entrance

—

Just as the front doors explode.

Splintered wood scatters across the dirt road. Weles charges out, spitting in fury. Roots writhe in the earth beneath the demon, erupting from the soil to rise around him like a protective cage. He surveys his surroundings, head snapping left and right before his attention lands on Liska.

“You,” he seethes.

“Me,” she says pleasantly.

There is very little of the Leszy left in Weles’s appearance now. His eyes are blazing flames, his teeth needle sharp and too small in moss-speckled gums. When he licks his lips, his tongue is coated in crawling ants.

“Do you know what I was known as once?” he growls. “I was the god of chaos, the god of the underworld and its demons. But you humans, you fickle things, you forgot about me. This is your punishment. This time I am going to make sure I am remembered. Destroying your little village will be the first step of my return to glory.”

“But you can’t destroy it,” Liska protests. She forces a grin, arms akimbo. “Not while I have *it*.”

“Have what?” He stalks closer, withered lichen drooping from his arms. The sour stench of illness and decomposing offal clings to him like a veil. “*Have what?*”

“Haven’t you noticed that you’re not as powerful as you should be?” Liska pulls back the sleeve of her blouse to reveal the fetter on her wrist, stark white against the foggy blue morning. “The Leszy tricked you! He gave me some of his power, so you can never truly have it all.”

It is a gamble. She is hoping a demon’s spite and greed is stronger than its judgment—strong enough that she can keep its attention on her.

The gamble pays off. Weles stalks even closer—Liska backs away, toward the skinny apple tree that decorates the chapel yard. In a goading motion, she hides her fettered wrist behind her back, concealing the magic brimming in her palms.

“Give it to me,” Weles hisses. “That is mine by right!”

“I don’t have to,” Liska says in a singsong. “I’m not the one who made the bargain.”

Weles lunges. He is hulking, livid, and *huge*—when he crashes into her, it is like being trampled and crushed at once, the air forced from her lungs, pain exploding across her skin where he grapples her with vicious, knife-sharp talons.

They fall backward—into the trunk of the apple tree, then through it.

Liska’s spelldoor closes behind them, and they are back in the Driada.



They crash onto a log, girl and demon, the force of the impact knocking them apart. Liska scrambles to her feet, a panicked curse escaping her. In her haste, she did not picture exactly where she wanted to go, and now she has no idea where they are.

This part of the Driada is oppressive, claustrophobic, bare boughs intertwined above too tightly to let in anything more than slivers of muted light. The fog hangs thick and writhing, turning the trees into ghostly outlines that fade away, devoured by a ravenous white void.

Branches and leaves snap and shatter where Weles has fallen. The demon scrabbles to his feet, slipping on the rain-soaked earth.

“Foolish mouse,” he growls. “This is my domain. I will certainly destroy you now.”

“First you’ll have to catch me,” Liska says, waving her wrist once more. Then she takes off into the trees.

Over the past months, Liska has become adept at navigating the woodland. Branches and bushes that might once have tripped her are now mere obstacles, and she navigates them nimbly, bounding over fallen logs, leaping off hillocks, and stepping between roots. Weles, for all his power, will have no such luck. He has antlers, after all, and he has grown twice the size the Leszy was. Still, she needs to stay far enough ahead to keep him frustrated yet close enough to hold his attention, so she makes sure she can still hear him crashing through the undergrowth.

Blood drips into her eyes from a cut above her eyebrow where she struck a branch. Weles’s claws have left shallow grooves on her forearms where he grabbed her, though none deep enough to be life-threatening. Hopefully. She keeps going, exhaustion like an anvil on her chest, her breath wheezing and panicked in her ears. If only she could find... God, where is it?

Weles bounds from between the trees, fog trailing behind him in tendrils.

Liska scrambles away, but Weles raises his arm over his head, and the trees around him move on his command. Their branches arc toward Liska like greedy hands, catching her skirt, her hair, her skin as they attempt to pin her down. She lashes out with Onegdaj, magic bursting around her as she snatches at the

Driada's soul herself, commanding a bramble thicket to grow in front of her, shielding her.

The moment she is free, she bolts back into the trees. Weles's roar echoes behind her, but she does not stop—she needs to find it; where is it...? But first she needs a place to hide and gather her wits. There: that twisted tree. It will conceal her well enough.

She stumbles into a copse of wide, knobby trees, squeezing into the hollow between their trunks. She commands a fern to grow around her, hoping it will provide her more cover. This hiding spot will not last long, she is sure—she can hear Weles drawing nearer, hissing and cursing as he rampages through the wood.

Liska tries to ignore the sounds, focusing on catching her breath. She closes her eyes, inching carefully into the in-between and feeling at her surroundings. The wood is always a festival of souls, green and lush and bright as things grow and wither and grow again. Woven through it all is a single, watchful thread: the soul of the Driada itself.

It is a formidable presence, cynical and aloof. Yet as Liska reaches for it, it responds with the eager familiarity of a dog recognizing its master. She gasps. She knows this touch, soft and careful. She knows this earthy scent, this steady, grounding presence. This is the Leszy's magic, still uncorrupted by Weles.

“Can you guide me?” she asks, picturing her destination in her mind. “I have lost my way.”

The Driada stirs. She smells unfurling leaves and rotting wood and muddy animal fur. Suddenly she knows exactly where to go—her feet are certain of their path, even through the fog, even in the darkest night. Because she *knows* this wood. She knows every tree that surrounds her, every crisscrossing path and berry bush and animal rooting in the soil. She knows where they burrow, knows their hidden paths and secret hollows.

Is this how the Leszy sees the Driada? Is this how it feels to be the warden?

A new emotion fills her: distress. It is not her own but the wood's, acute and alarming. The Driada is in *pain*, writhing in agony as it is crushed and ruined by the hands of a demon, forced by his magic to act against its will. *Save me*, the leaves whisper, the tree trunks groan.

“I will try,” she promises.

Liska returns to her body just in time to glimpse Weles emerging between the trees, uprooting a sapling that stands in his way and tossing it aside. Behind him lies a trail of destruction, snapped trees and trampled undergrowth left in mutilated heaps.

“Where are you, where are you, *where are you?*” he shrieks, spitting with hatred.

Liska’s heart pounds. Tucked between the trees like this, she is no better than a sitting duck—if he finds her, she will have nowhere to go. She holds her breath, forcing her limbs still. The demon prowls closer, scenting the air like a bloodhound, his antlers catching in twigs above and sending the boughs clattering.

Closer and closer and closer he comes, so close that she can make out the ridges of bark on his body and spot the millipede that crawls over his lichen-cloaked shoulder. His lungs rattle with every inhalation, his exhalations raspy and urgent. Somehow he does not see her—he walks past her hiding spot, prowls ahead and out of sight.

A sigh of relief escapes her. She begins to stand, holding Onegdaj in front of her to—

“There you are, little mouse.”

Her heart leaps into her throat. She scrambles back against the trunk—through a crack between the ferns, a white eye of flame peers at her, highlighting a gaunt, skeletal face. Before she can move, Weles raises an arm and tears the tree that shelters Liska out of the soil, bark and splinters peppering her skin. She scrambles back, but there is nowhere to go—Weles pins her to the ground, his mouth opening wider and wider until his jaw unhinges like a serpent’s, dripping saliva-slick moss onto Liska’s face.

Liska jerks forward and stabs Onegdaj through his lower jaw.

The blade breaks flesh and bone with a hideous squelch, blood-sap trailing after it when she yanks it back out. The demon rears back with a soul-rattling screech.

Liska takes off once more. Weles is on her heels in hot pursuit, his clawed fingers grabbing at her skirts, her hair, her skin. She guides him through the

wood, down the path the Driada had showed her. His claws snag on her shoulder, tearing the velvet of her gorset. Beads and embroidery snap free.

Almost there, almost...

She makes it to the ruined temple just as Weles catches her.

LISKA AND THE LESZY

IT IS NOT WELES'S ARMS that grab her but branches, thorny branches like those of a rosebush pulling taut around her ankles. They yank her backward, dragging her through mud and detritus and stones, thorns digging into her skin.

Then Weles is on top of her, sneering as he bends down, rancid spittle dripping from his teeth. He no longer looks anything like the Leszy. He is pure monster, pure demon, pure death breathing onto her face.

"I have you now, little mouse," he purrs, his twig-thin fingers pressing against her jugular. "And I shall take what is mine."

His other hand squeezes the fetter on her wrist. In the force of his grip, it cracks like a snail shell, shattering. Liska cannot help the whimper that escapes her.

"Thank you," says Weles smugly, releasing her to hold up and inspect his prize.

This is what Liska has been waiting for: a distraction. Watching him carefully, she stumbles back, step by step by step. Pretending she is afraid, pretending she does not have a plan, farther and farther until she is backed against the antlered totem. *Yes*. She clenches her teeth and begins to prepare a spell as she fumbles for the matches in her pocket. If Weles looks up, she will be doomed.

He does not.

Liska drags the match down the side of the box with trembling fingers. *Scriiiiitch*.

Not hard enough. The match doesn't light.

Weles turns around. His eyes land on the box in her hands, and his eyes flare white as he realizes what she is doing.

“No!” He pounces toward her, roots erupting around him and aiming for Liska’s throat.

Her fingers close around the second match, streak it down the side of the matchbox. This time the flame lights.

“Too late,” she says as Weles’s roots close in around her. She releases her magic, tapping into the fire’s soul, and slaps her hand against the totem behind her.

“Burn the temple.”

The totem erupts into flame. Blue flame, bright as sunlight, a greedy tongue that laps at the totem and devours it. It spreads eagerly onto the forest floor, parting around Liska like a wave. Everything begins to burn—roots and stones and corpses, bones melting into a maw of flame.

For a heartbeat, Weles gapes in disbelief. Then he howls, crashing to his knees, clutching at his head. Shudders wrack his body; he doubles over, his hands scrabbling through the soil as if he could grasp the flames and tear them away before the ruins burn. But he cannot. It is too late.

It worked. Her foolish plan, based on nothing but an educated guess, actually *worked*.

It is like the Leszy said: all spirits are anchored to something. Weles may have lived in the Leszy’s heart, but *this* is where the Leszy brought his sacrifices, where Weles’s power originated. And now it is burning away. Burning and burning and burning, until every last scrap of the temple is consumed. Only then does the fire fade, leaving girl and demon standing in a field of drifting ashes.

Suddenly Weles’s eyes, shut in agony, snap open—they are mortal once again, fern green. With slow, tedious motions, he clambers to his feet. As he moves, bark flakes and peels from him like old paint, revealing pale skin below. Lichen and branches wither and rot, falling from his limbs. His features twist and peel like an insect shedding its exoskeleton. Liska blinks, and it is once again the Leszy she sees, austere and pale and human, so blessedly human.

She hesitates. “Eliasz?”

A smile breaks across his face, complete with those beautiful, elusive dimples.

“Hello, not-so-clever fox.”

She cries out in relief and rushes to him, launching herself into his arms. She does not care that his clothing is in shreds, that there are leaves in his hair, or that his skin is slick with sweat and mud. He laughs, a sound that rumbles in his chest, rich as honey and warm as a hearth’s glow.

“Eliasz.” Her voice hitches.

He presses his face into her neck, his silky white hair tickling her cheek. She runs her hand through his hair, curls her fingers around the base of one antler.

“It worked,” she gasps. “It worked.”

“You incredible thing,” he breathes against her collarbone, then kisses it where the shirt has been torn, where there are bruises from the demon’s merciless fingers. “Only you could pull off something so reckless yet so brilliant.”

“You saw?”

He inclines his head. “Through his eyes. I was there all along, fighting him from within, trying to take my magic back.”

“Then we defeated him together,” she says with a grin. “You’re free, Leszy.”

“I’m free,” he echoes, bemused. His eyes are sparkling like morning dew. “Yes. Yes, I am indeed.” His hands tighten on her waist, tugging her flush against him.

Relief rushes through her, followed by bliss as he cants his chin down, eyelashes brushing his cheekbones and mouth parted in invitation. Liska presses her lips to his, reveling in the feeling—how he can be simultaneously fragile and unbreakable, how he can both satiate her and make her beg for more. The wood around them vanishes. It is just her and him and him and her, the Leszy and Liska and Liska and the Leszy.

Then something strange happens.

Through their kiss, from his tongue and lips and his breath, rushes tingling magic. She twitches in surprise, but he only makes a reassuring noise, one hand finding her waistband under Onegdaj’s sheath, sliding beneath it to splay over her hip. His power sears through her like lightning—it tastes of wilderness and freedom and rot and rebirth, curls comfortably in her chest like it has always belonged there.

The Leszy draws back, pulling a gasp of pleasure from her lips as he kisses her jaw, then the dip between her collarbones, then the scars across her shoulder.

With every kiss, he maps out more and more of the Driada in her mind. She can see it, sense it, feel it—the sleepy wisdom of ancient trees, the swell of earth parted by roots, the sprouting of toadstools in rain-saturated soil. All of it knows her—all of it *belongs* to her.

“Leszy—” She tries to stop him, but he silences her with his mouth. A shiver runs up her spine; his muscles are taut beneath her fingertips as she curls one arm around his shoulders—

And touches the branch sprouting from beneath his collarbone.

“Leszy!” Liska wrenches herself free, stumbles back. When she meets the Leszy’s eyes, his gaze is stricken and apologetic. There is bark dusting his cheekbones, clambering over his nose, obscuring the mole beneath his eye. Lichen coils around his antlers, sprouts in his hair. Branches, those horrible black branches, protrude from his elbows, his shoulders, growing as she watches.

He raises his hand—in his palm is Onegdaj, lethal and cruel.

Before Liska can utter a cry, he thrusts the dagger into his heart.

What follows is the breaking of earth and sky. That is the only way to explain it—the way the wind snaps like the crack of a whip, the way the earth writhes and screams and heaves beneath them. The Leszy’s eyes flare with blinding white light, and from his mouth comes a hoarse shriek—Weles’s voice, agonized and furious. Around him, tree roots gather and thrash like the throes of a dying animal.

When the deluge ceases, all that is left is the Leszy, green-eyed and unsteady on his feet with a knife embedded in his heart.

“No!” The word tears itself from Liska’s throat, brutal and bloody. She rushes back toward the czarownik as he slumps to his knees, his hands falling limp at his sides. She grabs desperately at his shirt, his arms, the dagger in his chest. “Don’t do this, please. Don’t do this.”

His hands close around hers, pulling them gently away. “Liska, listen. Liska, I don’t have much time.”

“But... but your *magic*,” she gasps. She can feel the wood singing through her veins, every rustling frond and furled leaf a harmony. It echoes her confusion, her panic, her pain. “I can feel it, all of it. Eliaz, please, what did you do?”

He exhales shakily. “That theory of mine.” He wavers, nearly teetering over—Liska falls to her knees and pulls him against her, cradling the back of his head in the crook of her arm. “I gave you all my powers so that Weles could not take them back.”

“But... but how?” Her voice breaks. “You said no one could take another’s magic—you said it was part of the soul—you said... Please.” She bites her lip, trying futilely to hold back tears. “I don’t understand.”

His eyelids flutter weakly. “Twin souls,” he says.

A room green with plants, notes scrawled maddeningly along the walls, the Leszy slumbering fitfully. A heavy book rests on his desk: *Orlica: An Arcane History*.

“Oh,” Liska whispers.

“You know it?”

She sniffs. “I read your book.”

He raises an eyebrow. Even now, his eyes sparkle. “Clever fox,” he whispers. “You know, there was a time I hoped I could find my twin soul. Soon after I built the Driada, when I was looking for ways out of my bargain, I thought it could be one way to pass my curse on to someone else. I obsessed, I theorized, but eventually I gave up. I forgot... until Wałkowo. Until I was able to pull the strzygoń’s poison out of your soul.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “That can’t be it.” And yet... hadn’t Kazimiera said it would be impossible?

“I struggled to believe it too,” the Leszy says gently. “When I realized what was happening, I nearly despaired. How could this meddling village girl be my match? But of course you were. *Of course you were*. In nature, everything balances itself. There can be no winter without summer, no shadow without the sun. You are my soul, Liska Radost. I lived seven hundred years to find you.”

He coughs terribly, and blood drips down his chin. It’s no longer translucent and thick as sap, but deep wine red. Liska wipes it away with her thumb, rests her bloodied hand on his cheek as she trembles.

“I can’t accept that,” she says firmly. “I won’t. Not unless you get up.” She tries in vain to stand, to haul him up with her, but her tired legs will not obey.

“Please,” she begs. “Eliasz, get up. We’ll go to Stodoła, we’ll get you help, we’ll...” A frustrated sob seizes her.

“Liska, it’s going to be all right. Look at me.” His weakening hand finds her chin, guiding her face down until their foreheads are touching. “You’re going to be all right. You are the Driada’s warden now.”

With that, he moves his hands to Onegdaj’s hilt and tears the dagger from his chest.

Blood gushes forth, drenching them both. In her shock, Liska’s grip slackens, and the Leszy slides out of her arms, dropping to the forest floor.

“Eliasz!” She falls to her knees at his side, pressing her palms over his chest, over his heart, as if she can force the blood back into his veins. The Leszy grunts softly—he raises a hand, twining his fingers between hers.

“Liska, look, *look*.” He raises both their hands, slathered in blood—*human* blood, dripping from their intertwined fingertips—and smiles brightly. “Now I am truly free.”

She chokes out a laugh, desperate and broken. “How can you say that? How —” *How could you do this to me?* She wants to scream it at him, she wants to scream it at God, she wants him to stand with his usual grace and take her in his arms and tell her it was all part of his brilliant plan, that he heals fast, and that by tomorrow, the wound on his chest will only be a scar.

But he does none of those things. Because he is human now.

“I’m sorry,” he says weakly. “I wish I had another choice, but... he was coming back. I could already feel him waking inside me.” His eyes are drifting closed; he forces them open, more blood bubbling at his lips as he whispers, “This was the only way to free the Driada from his influence. And... it is only right that I was the last sacrifice.”

There is no pain on his face, only serenity, his mouth relaxed into a peaceful smile. But Liska is not giving up. She gathers what little remains of her magic and reaches for his soul, trying to formulate a spell that could save him, or at least stabilize him, but the wound is too deep and his heart is stopping and his magic is gone, it’s gone—

“Leszy, take your magic back,” she grits out. “Take it back so I can heal you!” She is shouting now, furious like she has never been before.

“I cannot,” he murmurs. “It’s yours now. It has always been yours, every part of me.”

She chokes on a sob, stifles it with the back of her hand. It’s not fair; none of this is fair. Stories like theirs are supposed to have happy endings. This cannot happen, not now. Not when he is finally free, finally human, when he is hers and she is his, and she can’t accept this, she can’t.

“Please,” she begs. “Surely there must be some spell—there must be something, anything. Please, Elias, please. Tell me how to save you.”

“Liska, Liseczka. *Oj, lisku.*” He raises her hand to his lips, kisses her knuckles in a final act of worship. His smile is that of a man complete.

“I am already saved.”



A long time ago, a boy sold his heart to a demon in exchange for belonging. For every century he lived, he had to take a life, and with every life he took, he died a little more. After seven hundred years, he was no better than one of his spirits, his grand manor turned into a haunting ground and the memory of his former glory faded into myth. Then, on the night of the summer solstice, a girl wandered into the wood.

She thought she might die. He intended to kill her.

Instead, she taught him how to live.

He died to save them all.



ENDURE

SHE GROWS FLOWERS FOR HIM.

At her behest, hundreds of buds erupt from the earth, unfurling white petals that shimmer like tears of starlight. These are the flowers from the waterfall, twins of the one he tucked into her hair.

This is the last time they will ever grow in the Driada.

Liska buries him in the flowers, and she does not weep, for he asked her not to mourn him. When she is done, she curls up at his side, clutching his lifeless hand to her chest as exhaustion crashes over her. Her eyes close, and she succumbs to sleep.

She does not see it when the trees bow to their fallen master.

She does not see it when the wound in his chest sprouts a young green fern, when his skin fissures like soil beneath hot sun and his body falls apart, returning to the earth he ruled over for seven hundred years.

She does not see it when the fern wraps its delicate fronds around her body and pulls her beneath the soil. She does not know it carries her, by some strange woodland magic, all the way back to the border.

She does not see it when light breaks through the Driada's canopy, when the ever-present mists vanish at last and the woodland soil morphs into something benevolent, shaking free the final threads of Welles's corruption.

She does not know that a thousand years ago, Orlicans stopped worshipping the greater demon they called the god of the underworld. In revenge, he began to create demons from the restless souls of their dead. Those demons rampaged

across the country, sowing chaos until the Leszy forged the Driada and trapped them all inside.

Now Weles is dead, and they are gone.



Liska opens her eyes to a cascade of bright sunlight, shattering in uneven beams through the shutters of her Stodoła home. She is on the lumpy bed in the alcove where Mama usually sleeps, tucked under a woolen blanket. A straw cross is nailed over the headboard, and Liska's favorite decoration, a colorful pajak, hangs overhead. She'd made it with Tata when she was five.

Mama has just entered the house—Liska can tell by the creak of the door and the burst of cold air that sweeps through the rooms. She shivers but does not call out. She is too lost in herself, thoughts abuzz like angry bees. Why is she here? What happened? The Leszy... the Driada... the demon... Was it all a dream?

No. The ache in her heart is too real. The more conscious she becomes, the more acutely she feels it, cruelly meticulous as it devours her insides. She kicks off the blanket, forces herself upright despite the aching protests of her body, and looks down.

She is wearing nothing but a nightgown, plastered to her skin with sweat. She pulls it aside, little by little, surveying her body. It is all there: the scars from the strzygoń, the scratches from Weles's thorns, the bruises around her neck from his fingers. All of them are faded, scabbed, or yellowed, as if a few days have passed. But surely not?

"Liska?" The familiar voice that comes from the entryway is not Mama's. *Obno*. "Are you awake?"

Marysieńka steps around the corner.

Liska's muscles seize in surprise, but her mind remains blank. She knows she ought to be nervous, frightened even, but she cannot feel anything. Well, anything but the teeth of grief chewing through her rib cage, hollowing her from the inside out.

When she looks over Marysieńka, her gaze is purely analytical. Her cousin looks good; though it has been less than a year, she no longer wears mourning black. Her blond hair is bound in a single shining braid. She must have just

returned from church—she wears new strój, a rich emerald skirt and beautiful gorset embroidered in red roses with green stems.

Liska must be looking at her strangely, because Marysieńka hesitates. Then she tugs at the ribbons of her gorset awkwardly, showing off the beads sewn around the eyelets. “Do you like it?” she asks. “I embroidered it myself. Oh, here. You must be thirsty.”

She walks to the kitchen and pours boiled water into a mug from the kettle, then returns to Liska’s side. Liska takes the mug gratefully. She raises it to her lips with shaking hands and gulps the water down, soothing the parched ache of her throat. Then she wipes her mouth on her bare arm and asks, “Why are you here?”

Marysieńka twines her hands in her lap nervously. “Because you’re my cousin. And—and my friend.”

“But you’re not—” Liska clears her throat. “You’re not afraid of me?”

“Well,” Marysieńka says, looking down at her hands, “I certainly was, after... after Tomasz. But now... things have changed. Time has passed. And... I was worried, I suppose. You’ve... um, you’ve been asleep for two days, Liska. Ciocia Dobrawa told me the villagers found you at the edge of the Driada, all scratched up and bleeding.”

“Oh,” Liska says distantly.

“Yes,” Marysieńka says. “You had a terrible fever—Ciocia wasn’t even sure you would live. Gave us all a fright. Even Father Paweł prayed over you, hoping it would help. You did wake afterward, but you were delirious. You kept saying one name: ‘Eliasz.’”

Liska’s heart shrivels and dies like a sapling beneath too much sun.

Marysieńka hesitates. “Do you remember none of this?”

Liska does not. What she does remember is this: Weles rampaging into the Stodoła streets, Maksio running off with Father Paweł, a game of cat and mouse through the woods, a burning totem, and then the Leszy...

Leszy...

She wraps her arms around herself, trying to divert her thoughts before anguish consumes her. “Did... did you see what happened? With the demon, I mean.”

Marysieńka shakes her head. “No, but I heard about it. When Father Paweł came asking for the militia, I decided to come back with them to the village and see if I could help.”

Liska frowns. “Come *back*?”

She sucks on her bottom lip with a guilty expression. “I... I don’t actually live in Stodoła anymore, Liska. Pani Prawota found me work as a seamstress in Gwiazdno.”

Liska’s brain processes the new information sluggishly, her thoughts lethargic. No wonder Marysieńka looks so happy. She’s finally free of Stodoła, like she always wished to be. Whatever weight she carried when Liska last saw her at Tomasz’s grave is gone now. She has shed life’s trials like a butterfly sheds its cocoon and has grown stronger for it.

Liska wishes she knew how to do that. She feels like the pain is going to eat her alive, every thump of her heart like words scorched into her soul. *He’s gone, he’s gone, he’s gone*, they say. Looking away from Marysieńka, she clutches at her chest as if she could wrench open her rib cage and empty out all the emotions.

“How did you do it?” she asks hoarsely.

“Do what?”

“Endure. After... after I... after he...”

“After Tomasz died?” Marysieńka says it kindly, without vitriol. “I don’t know. I simply went on, day by day. Grief is a bit like a chronic ache, I think—it’s always there, but sometimes you notice it more and sometimes less, and sometimes it’s unbearable and sometimes you think it might be gone for good.” She sits down beside Liska, taking her hand.

“That day we spoke at the grave, I was not in a good place. I lashed out, and I shouldn’t have. The next morning, when I heard you had left during Kupała, I felt awful. Ciocia wouldn’t tell anyone where you had gone, but I figured it was one of the cities. So when Pani Prawota found me the apprenticeship in Gwiazdno, I jumped on the opportunity. I was hoping I could see you again. When I couldn’t find you, I simply assumed you’d moved elsewhere. I never thought you were in the *Driada*, of all places.” She shakes her head in wonderment. “Liska, I am so sorry.”

Marysieńka, apologizing. It should feel good. It should feel like something. But there is nothing there—a vast, cavernous nothing.

She cannot stand that emptiness. She wants to feel something, anything at all. So she clutches Marysieńka's hand like a lifeline and whispers, "Maryś, he's gone."

"Who?"

Before Liska can reply, the front door whooshes open again and Dobrawa Radost walks in, spotless in her Sunday strój. Maksio follows behind her, wearing unfamiliar, homespun clothing and a sheepskin vest. His eyes go immediately to Liska; his lips part in a relieved gasp. Without missing a beat, he runs straight into her arms, clutching her so tight, she can hardly breathe. When he finally releases her, he grabs for his notebook and hastily writes a question.

Four words, each a knife stroke carving her open.

Where is the Leszy?

Liska breaks. The tears come in a painful, stinging torrent, sobs threatening to burst through her chest. Marysieńka pulls her close, stroking her hair until she calms enough to drink the bitter herbal tea Mama brings.

If Dobrawa Radost is glad to see her daughter alive, she does not show it. She simply looms over them all, straight-backed and stern, taking in the scene with a steady gaze. Finally she pulls over a chair and sits in front of Liska.

"Tell us what happened," she says.

So Liska does. She tells them all of it, from the moment she entered the Driada on Kupała Night to the moment the Leszy plunged the knife into his heart. Once she starts, she cannot stop—the events of the past few months pour out of her like the waters of a broken dam. Maksio sits beside her, leaning his head on her shoulder and valiantly trying to quiet his sniffles. When she finishes, he dries his eyes on his sleeve and gives her an encouraging smile.

Liska smiles back. It feels good to speak everything out loud—it makes her pain more tangible somehow, turns it into something she can grasp. And if she can grasp it, she can tame it. If she can tame it, then she can turn it into something good.

In this thought alone, she finds hope.

Marysieńka takes her hand again, holds it like fragile porcelain. “I think I understand,” she says.

But Mama is not so kind. Mama stands from her chair and crosses her arms and thins her lips into a tight line. Liska wonders how much of her story her mother believes. Before she can ask, Dobrawa Radost takes her shoulders in a grip that is too forceful to be comforting.

“Hearing all this, Liska, I have only one question for you. What will you do now?”

Liska looks at Maksio, then around herself, at the place that nurtured her and the mother who raised her. This was all she wanted once: to live in a thatched-roof home just like this one, to open creaking shutters and see a sky swathed in chimney smoke. To do the expected: catch the eye of a proper village boy, get married like a proper village girl. Live a proper, mundane village life.

But Liska is not proper. She is a czarownik with butterflies in her chest and a forest in her veins, and she has carved out a place for herself that is fully her own.

The Leszy is gone, but the Driada is not. The House Under the Rowan Tree is not. Maksio and Jaga are not. Her home is out there, in the great wide wilderness that lurks and threatens and enchants.

“I’m going back,” she decides. The rightness of it unfurls in her chest like a blossom.

“B-back?” Marysieńka stammers, at the same time as Dobrawa demands, “Whyever would you do something so foolish?”

Liska lifts her hand to her ear, brushing the spot where the Leszy once tucked a white-petaled flower, and smiles.

“The wood must always have a warden.”



EPILOGUE

CIOCIA LISKA IS VERY STRANGE.

Basia is only ten, but she knows this. She knows it, just like she knows that the library door appears only if she asks politely, that the cat who haunts the manor is not a cat at all, and that Maksio—no, her big brother Maksio, who is in *charge*, don't forget—avoids speaking because his voice is magic. Basia knows too that she is just as strange as them, because when Mama left her at the mouth of the great big forest, shoving her toward Ciocia Liska, she said, "I heard someone at the inn say that you were asking around for people with..." She shudders at the next word. "*Magic*. Well, here is one. If you want her, take her—I can handle her no longer."

Since then, Basia has been living in the great big house full of peculiar paintings and candles that turn on when she tells them to and a lovely, enormous fern in the middle of the garden, where she likes to hide from the sun. Every day, Maksio will take her into the glass library and teach her things—letters, numbers, stories. And every other day—or less often, if she is very busy—Ciocia Liska will go with her to the top of the tower, and Basia will learn magic.

Under Liska's instruction, Basia has learned many things. She can coax buds into bloom and turn water into ice and ask the forest for directions. Sometimes Liska will hold out her hands, and blue butterflies will spring forth. Then Basia will send out her own little bees, bees of yellow magic, to chase after them, and she and Liska will laugh and cheer as their conjurations race around the room in a game of magical tag.

Basia is very content. She does not think of home or Mama often, and when she does, all she can remember is the dirty floor on which she slept and the sting of Mama's hand whenever she would do something wicked, like convince their hound to dance on its back legs or turn the hearth's flames into little birds. Here at the manor, Liska never strikes her or even stops her. Instead, she will grin proudly and clap in delight and say, "That was well done, Basia!" And Basia will believe her.

There are times, though, when Liska stops smiling. It is brief, but sometimes Basia will see her trailing her hand along certain things, and there will be tears in her eyes. Basia doesn't quite understand it: How can a sword or an old book or a rowanberry make someone sad?

It doesn't matter. Because most of the time Liska is great fun—always ready with a grin or a joke, a whirlwind coming and going, often armed with a dagger or a book. She calls herself a warden. Basia likes the word, though Liska never really explains it.

"Now that the demons are gone," she will say, "all these foolish humans think they can enter my wood as they please. They forget this is still a spirit-wood, and thus it is home to spirits. The only difference now is that those spirits aren't corrupted by a demon, so they won't eat them alive."

Basia knows what spirits she means—she knows she should never dance with a *rusalka*, because its songs will make her dance and dance and dance until Liska has to come rescue her. She knows that the *utopiec* will pull her into the swamp, and then *Jaga* the not-cat will make fun of her filthy clothes. She knows of other ones too: *kikimora* with their spinning wheel and *bannik* in the bathroom and *bies* that howl in the night. They were wicked once, Liska says. Now, without an old god to corrupt them, they are but mischief makers, uprooting order in the woods. Still, they do not care for mortal ways or emotions, and that makes them dangerous.

But there is one spirit that is different. Basia knows about it only because she has followed *Ciocia Liska* when she shouldn't. She couldn't help it, she was curious! And once she started, she couldn't stop. It is like watching a fairy tale unfold—she has to know what happens next.

Here is the story so far:

In the night, the very dead of night, when the stars sleep tucked beneath the blanket of ink-dark sky, Ciocia Liska will leave the manor. She does not bring a lantern—she will conjure up one of her glowing butterflies to light the way, and it will give everything she passes very long shadows. She will go into the wood, and it will greet her like an old friend, the trees bowing and fern fronds stretching to brush against her ankles.

That is when he comes.

A stag, a beautiful stag white as starlight, with evergreen eyes and antlers so tall, Basia is afraid they will get stuck in the trees. When he walks, he leaves no marks on the woodland soil, and when Liska reaches out to touch his head, her hand goes through him as though he is made of mist.

This is the strangest part of it all: every time Liska meets the stag, she tries to touch him. Every time, her hand passes through.

Until one night, one rainy spring night, it does not.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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A. B. PORANEK grew up in Canada but spent her summers in the Polish countryside, reading her grandfather's library and helping care for his chickens. Her love of animals led her to pursue a degree in veterinary medicine, though she never stopped writing along the way. Her first novel, *Where the Dark Stands Still*, is an ode to Poland's wild woodlands, wilder folktales, and the girls who were raised by them.

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