

THE IRON GATE

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It was the fifth day till midwinter in my eleventh year when I met the witch.

The birds bickered prettily that morning from their perches overhead while I traipsed through the forbidden woods in search of stardrop irises for Mother. Some of them pined for company, but most just wanted everyone to know how big and scary they were.

The lakeside was the best spot for irises in the woods, but the path there was *wrong*, so I headed to the stream instead. A latchberry patch along the way gave me a mid-morning snack and purple fingers, and a winter morel hiding among a cluster of redcaps went into my satchel for later.

I found my first bunch of irises along the streambank, easy to spot by their violet petals, speckled with white dots. There were thirteen flowers, so I plucked six and put them in my pressing book, three to a page—Father always said, *‘Never harvest more than half, or else you’ll harvest only once.’* Five more clusters of irises passed and were divided into my book before my stomach growled for more than berries. I crossed the shallows and lunched in Horseshoe Meadow on bread, cheese, and my morel. A doe and two fauns grazed downwind, while their buck kept a wary ear pointed in my direction.

Sated, I lay back on a flat rock and dozed until the wind shifted and brought a heady, dense scent, like a freshly turned mat of leaf mulch. I rose and followed my nose to a friendly old oak, gnarled and bowed in all the right ways. I knelt at the base of the trunk and drove my fingers through the crunchy loam, digging around a bit until I found a firm lump: a black truffle, the size of a hen’s egg. I popped it into my satchel, and dove back in.

The oak yielded a cluster of five mushrooms. So pleased with myself was I that it took several minutes for me to notice, a short way off between the trees, the witch’s hut.

Crooked branches woven around sapling posts formed the walls, roughly packed with daub. The thatch roof hid beneath a thick mossy mat. A thin line of smoke rose from a chimney, but I saw no movement through the windows beyond shifting firelight.

Hoping I hadn't been spotted, I turned to find the witch behind me, arms bloody up to the elbows and dragging a buck by the antlers.

They were not a woman, as the older children claimed: they were a vornyl, tall and willowy, like me. Dark lavender hair hung in braids down their back, strung with feathers and bits of bone. They wore linen skirts gone to tatters around their calves, and a sleeveless leather vest open in the front. Pale scars crossed the mahogany skin of their chest and stomach, forming intricate designs.

"You'll have been trying to steal my potions then, have you?" they said.

"N—no, honored vyr," I stammered, looking away from their bloody hands. "I smelled truffles—I didn't know they were yours, I swear." I dug into my satchel and brought out the truffles. One jittered off the pile and fell from my trembling hands. "I'll give them back, I'm sorry!"

The witch considered me with narrowed eyes and flared nostrils. "What's rightfully found can't be claimed by me." They gestured to the buck. "Give us a hand. You'll have tea then?"

I chewed my lip so hard I tasted blood. "Yes, honored vyr." Everyone knew that to scorn a witch's hospitality was to invite a terrible curse upon your family.

We dragged the buck around the hut into a long and narrow yard, fenced in by the same loose-woven branches as the hut's walls, and wrestled it up onto a stone slab resting across two stumps. The witch did most of the work. Much of the yard was claimed by a wild and overgrown garden. There was mandrake, belladonna, a thicket of silphium—every medicinal plant or herb I had ever learned about, and dozens more I hadn't. At the very back, in the center of the fence, stood a wrought iron gate. Tall and narrow, it loomed over an arc of gravel in which nothing grew. Looking at it made my skin crawl.

The witch plunged their arms into a water trough by the fence and scrubbed away the blood, then gestured to the doorway into the hut. I swallowed and stepped inside. Musty air greeted me, dense with fragrant herbs, decay, and smoke. An iron tripod stood over a cookfire in the center of the floor, and light streamed in through the windows. The witch followed me in and pointed to a rickety chair beside the fire. I sat as they hung a kettle in the flames.

“Right,” they said, “that’ll be just a moment.” They stepped back outside. A moment later I flinched at the sound of snapping limbs, followed by the rasping of steel against bone.

I glanced around the interior of the hut for anything to distract my imagination. Baskets hung from every rafter, alongside bundles of drying flowers and herbs. Shelves and cupboards lined the walls, and a sleeping pallet was barely visible around the corners of a deerskin curtain.

Steam had only just begun to rise from the kettle when the sounds outside ended with another plunging and scrubbing in the trough. The witch rejoined me a moment later with a bundle of leaves in hand.

“So. What brings this young vyr! deep into the woods?” They fetched a clay teapot and roughly chopped the leaves into it. “Are you lost, child?”

“No,” I hesitated. It was bad to lie to a witch, but worse the more one knew about you. “I was hunting mushrooms.”

They set up a small table for the pot and two cups, then took the handle of the boiling kettle with a bare hand and poured. “And what have you found?” A minty zest joined the room’s diverse aroma.

“I picked a morel earlier.” Lying is easiest paired with truth.

They smiled, showing off yellowed teeth. “And there’s no other reason for your visit to the forest today?”

“No, honored vyr.”

“Danik,” the witch said. “My name is Danik. What’s yours?”

“Fog,” I said.

Danik eyed the bright white hairs that stood out against the dark skin of my forearms. “Perhaps ‘Milksap’ might have been more fitting? You even smell like it—though I suspect that’s from the irises in your bag you’ve lied to me about.”

Terror flooded me so rapidly I burst into tears and words at the same time. “Please don’t curse us, honored vyr—”

“Danik.”

“—I didn’t mean to, Mother needs—she said Father used to bring her stardrop irises and now she can’t paint—I didn’t—and the lake path was wrong today or I

wouldn't even have bothered you—please spare her—” The sobs caught up and stole my voice, and I wailed into my arms until I ran out of breath.

The witch sat, impassive, teacup in hand. “Are we done with that?”

I whimpered miserably.

“So, your mother sent you into the forbidden woods for stardrop irises to make paint?”

I shook my head. “They're to be her Yulemas gift.”

“Why did your father stop bringing them?”

“He's... gone.”

The witch's eye twitched. “I see.”

“I'm sorry I lied. I was—that is, the other children say—” I hung my head. “I'm sorry. Only please don't curse us, Mother is already... Please, I'll do anything.”

“Yes, I think you would. That was very rude of you, after accepting my hospitality.” The witch paused for a loud slurp of tea. “Very well. I will spare you—if you perform four tasks for me, before the sun sets on the winter solstice. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes, honored vyr.” I slumped in defeat. With the solstice only four days away, I'd never avert the curse *and* harvest enough irises for Mother's gift.

“Very good,” they said. “For your first task, you will gather duskmooss. You know it? Reddish-brown, favors the branches of the wych elm tree?”

I nodded.

“Bring me ten bundles, this big around and this long.” They gestured with their hands.

“Yes, honored—”

“*Danik.*”

My voice seemingly stolen once more, I nodded vigorously.

“Don't forget your tea, Fog.” The witch smiled through the steam rising off their cup. I burned my tongue on my first rushed sip, and barely tasted the mint. The moment the cup was empty, I took my leave and ran all the way back home.

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The following morning I woke to the family of squirrels chattering in the cork oak outside my window. As always, the parents argued over the depth of their acorn stores for the coming winter, while the children squabbled over who couldn't catch who while they scampered across the soft bark. Spurred by the witch's looming curse, I rose and raced through my morning chores.

An hour later, I stepped over the low stone wall that surrounded our cottage yard onto the path. The distant shouts and squeals of the village children rose to my right. A spotted hawk circling overhead thought, *It's right there. These creatures hunt bad*, so they must've been playing hide-and-seek. When the rains had stopped back in spring, none of the boys and girls would let me play anymore; they said I was cheating when I found them.

I ran across the wide field at the edge of our homestead, into the forbidden woods. By the time the sun had cut through the morning fog, I was high in the boughs of a wych elm, poking wispy clumps of dusk-moss free with a pronged stick. To my frustration, I discovered that moss compresses quite a lot when bundled, and the heaping pile I had gathered from the first elm amounted to a bundle half the size the witch demanded. With a sigh, I set off in search of another tree.

The birds sang their discontent at my trespass, and frequently I brushed at the tickle of ants and spiders crawling over me as I searched through the treetops. Seven full bundles later, I found a stand of elms dripping dusk-moss, gathered around a pile of broken boulders yellow with lichen. I clambered up into the canopies and went to work coating the rocks below in fallen moss.

Standing on a bough, I pulled down on a branch above to bring one last stubborn wisp of moss within my reach. With a sharp *crack*, it came free in my hand. My arms spun, grasping for support that wasn't there. I lashed out with my legs, hooking them around the branch I'd been standing on to swing upside down. The broken branch fell away and shattered on the rocks below, while the moss settled lightly atop the lichen. I pulled myself back upright, scooted to the trunk of the elm, and climbed down. My racing heart calmed while I gathered up my last three bundles. I slung the moss over my shoulder and trudged back to Horseshoe Meadow.

I arrived to find a column of smoke rising through the trees. In a space cleared outside the garden, twin fires burned on either side of a trench cut in the dirt, covered by a grill of thin shale. A stack of firewood stood against the fence nearby.

A thumping sound drew me toward the garden, and I peeked over the fence to watch Danik wedge the lid of a barrel into place with a wooden mallet. “I’ll be right with you,” they said without looking up.

The witch joined me a few minutes later. Taking a bundle of moss, they dunked it into the water trough, wrung it out, and laid it across the shale between the flames. “Keep the fires fed,” they said. “The moss must smolder, but not burn.”

We watched the damp moss begin to steam, and eventually smoke. Danik handed me a narrow shovel and a clay pot. “Collect the ash that gathers below, but do not scrape the dirt. It is better to lose ash than to add soil.”

And so I spent the afternoon, charring away the fruits of my labor into a fine ash the color of a rusty skillet. Within an hour I had stripped off my shirt and tied my hair back in a ponytail. The sun was setting as I scooped the last of the ash out of the trench between the dying fires. The witch tied a cloth over the opening as a lid.

“Your first task is complete,” they said. “Tomorrow, bring me fifty crimson allium bulbs, with stalks intact.”

“Yes, honored—er, Danik.” I bowed, and sprinted home through the dark woods. Mother fussed at my disheveled state over dinner that night, and drew a bath to wash the cobwebs out of my hair.

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The village children were playing wicker-kick in the field when I left home the next morning. They abandoned their game to laugh and throw rocks at me, but I easily outpaced them to the edge of the woods where they dared not give chase.

I took the lake path, since crimson allium grows best near water. Easy to spot by the blood-red blotches on its green stalks, I filled a burlap sack, counting up to fifty. I also found the stardrop irises that I’d been seeking the day I met the witch, but to my dismay, some animal had dug through them, leaving behind a carnage of trampled

stalks and petals. At least half of every cluster had been ravaged. Father's rule echoed in my mind, and I left the remaining flowers alone, feeling defeated.

Returning to Horseshoe Meadow, I stumbled at the sight of the witch's hut, now standing at the edge of the grass just beside the truffle oak. Danik made no mention of the change as they invited me inside, so I thought better than to risk rudeness in asking. We chopped the leaves off the bulbs, and dropped them into a simmering cauldron.

"They mustn't boil, only blanch," the witch instructed. "You'll know they are ready when the spots fade." After a few minutes, the leaves had faded to a yellow-green. They fished one out and rolled a stone pin over it from tip to base to squeeze out the insides, which they scraped into a wide pan, then gestured for me to continue.

I settled into the task while Danik used a bone needle to thread a cord through the allium bulbs and hung them in bundles. When the pan was full, they slid it into the large clay oven built into the wall of the hut and set out a second one. I continued rolling.

"You're quiet today," the witch said.

"Sorry, honored vyr," I muttered.

"Something is on your mind?"

Peals of laughter rang in my memory. "No, honored vyr."

I felt their eyes on my back, but they said nothing further. I finished rolling the leaves, and Danik placed the pan alongside the first in the oven.

"These will take a day to cook down. Meanwhile, for your third task," they said, and plucked a string of shells off a nail in the window frame. They held one up, with a mottled pink pattern on it and a point at the center of the spiral. "Marbled snails, from the stream. Fill this basket." The witch handed me a tall, narrow basket with a wicker lid.

I looked down inside of it, considering the size of the shell. I would need quite a few snails.

Danik smiled. "Did you wish to ask me something?"

I shook my head, but then after a moment's thought said, "What is all this for?"

The witch gestured to the chairs beside the fire. "Do you know why there are so few of us vernyl, but so many women and men?" they asked as we sat.

I hugged my chest. “Majestic Hawthorne told Miro that vernyl are mistakes. That we’re the chaff left over when the Lord has made enough boys and girls.”

Danik snorted. “The majestic is a cruel and stupid man.”

I gasped. Witch or no, it was still shocking to hear.

“Men and women see the world in a certain way, for they form together the spokes of a wheel, which in its turning creates life. Not all of them want—or survive—that pairing, so there must be many of them or humankind will dwindle and die. But our species does not exist in isolation from the world around us. *Our* pairing is not that of a tool. It is that of the roots and stalk of the allium.”

The witch held me with their black eyes, an intensity in their gaze I couldn’t look away from.

“Vernyl are *not* chaff. We are the path through the woods; the bridge over the river. The more humans wall ourselves from the natural world, the fewer of us are born to foster that connection—but the man who hides inside his walls against the fury of the wild has forgotten that we are guests here, not masters. Do you understand?”

Slowly, cautiously, I nodded. I *wasn’t* sure I did, but it felt right, somehow.

The witch blinked, and the spell of their gaze broke.

I frowned. “That... doesn’t answer my question.”

“It does not. Complete your tasks, and I will show you their purpose.”

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The next morning I waded into the shallows. With the streambed blurred by the flowing water, I discovered many pretty pink rocks, but few snails. I listened to the fish for any insights, but their thoughts were single-minded as ever.

Threat? Nope. Food? Nope. Food? Yep. Threat? Move.

After an hour’s search, I had caught only five snails, and a growing fear that I could search until spring without completing my task. My salvation came behind the mask of a sleepy racoon, whom I bribed with two of my snails. Once she’d finished her snack and licked her paws clean, she showed me where they hid: in the eddies of the stream, protected from the current.

As the little bandit waddled off to her warm den, I splashed eagerly into the frosty water and worked my way upstream all the way to the lake, hunting snails through the eddies and still pools on the way. I filled the basket by midafternoon.

In my excitement, I hadn't noticed the dark clouds rolling in to blot out the sun. I rarely minded the cold like the boys and girls in the village did, but as rain began to fall, a chill set into my bones. I set off toward the witch's hut, but to my dismay, Horseshoe Meadow was *wrong* today. Uncertain what to do, I backtracked to the lake. Perhaps the meadow wouldn't be *wrong* anymore in an hour or two.

The rain became a downpour, and soon I could hardly tell a sapling from a cattail. Forlorn and miserably cold, I spotted, a ways down the shoreline, a square of light. I approached it, my pulse tingling in my fingertips, until I stood before the witch's hut. The same fenced garden extended out behind it, where yesterday only marsh grass had grown.

I jumped as Danik spoke behind me. "Well, come on inside. The cauldron's almost ready." They stepped past, holding a bundle of cress.

"But—How—"

"You're welcome to stand in the rain and stutter till evening if you'd like, but I'm going inside." The witch entered the hut, leaving the door cracked behind them. I stood outside the door, unsettled, and weighing my discomfort—but the basket of snails wasn't getting any lighter.

"How did your hut move?" I asked, pulling the door shut behind me.

"It didn't. My home has always been here—just as it's always been on the edge of the meadow. It doesn't move, it simply *is* where it needs to be."

I frowned. "Are you trying to confuse me?"

The corner of Danik's lip twitched upward. "Possibly," they said, "but that wouldn't make it less true."

They tore the cress into bunches and dropped it into the bubbling cauldron. My stomach rumbled as the aroma of stewing allium wafted through the room.

"I'll take those." They dumped the basket of snails straight into the cauldron, then removed it from the flames. As they stirred, the snails floated to the surface, their mottled pink shells glazed over into a deep indigo.

"The heat, and the acid from the allium, change their color," Danik said.

“And this potion does... what, exactly?”

“This is river snail soup.” They fetched a pair of bowls. “Well?”

We ladled full our bowls. Danik showed me how to get to the snail meat with a barbed skewer, and set out a basket to the side of the table to collect the shells. I'd never eaten a snail before. It was less strange than I expected—the flavor somewhat buttery, complemented by the tangy allium. After the meal, they sent me to wash off the shells in the trough outside, then we cracked them open in a wide pan and put them in the oven to dry.

While we waited, Danik showed me the pans of allium extract from the day before. The contents had reduced to a thick layer of chalky yellow powder. It broke apart into flakes, which we funneled into a second clay pot next to the ash.

The downpour outside faded. Danik withdrew the shells from the oven and pointed out a mortar, and I watched the season's first snow begin to fall as I ground the shells into a fine blue powder.

When the snail powder had been stored in a third pot, Danik said, “Only one task remains. Return when the sun has quartered the sky tomorrow, and I will show you what it is.”

My feet crunched through the thin layer of fresh snow on my way back home.

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When I arrived at the witch's hut on the day of the solstice, they greeted me with tea. Over our cups, they said, “Till now, I have asked nothing overtly dangerous of you. In this fourth task however, I cannot guarantee your safety. So, honored Fog, I absolve you of your debt. You are free to leave now, if you choose.”

I eyed Danik through the steam rising off my tea, reading the implication. No ill fortune would befall me—but if I didn't complete my tasks, I would never learn what their purpose had been.

“I will complete my tasks,” I said.

“Very well.” Danik nodded. “We require a bone—the shoulder from an elk would suffice. But it must be *old*. Scoured by sun and wind, never welcomed back into the earth's embrace. Do you know where you might find such a bone?”

My pulse quickened. I had never come across bones in the woods like they'd described. Yet, some unnamed part of me—the same part that turned me away when a path was *wrong*—knew where it would be.

“Good,” the witch nodded, watching my face.

I followed Danik into the garden and down the path to the gate at the far end. It was brutally functional, with no decoration: simply bars of rough hammered iron sealing the gap in the witch's fence. Still, once my eyes had settled on it, I could not tear them away.

Danik's hand on my shoulder broke me free. They pointed to the sky. “Do not enter the boneyard until noon, when the sun reaches its zenith.” They pushed open the gate. I expected a furious shriek of metal, but it moved without a sound.

The path was *wrong*, but I walked it anyway. It looked no different from any other path through the woods, meandering around rocks and trees. But no birds sang overhead. No rodents scurried through the underbrush. I walked for what felt like an hour, with only the sounds of my own footfalls to accompany me.

Ahead, the path curved away into a gully. The sun stood at about half-noon, so I sat down to wait.

Without the motion of walking to distract me, the *wrongness* of the path nagged at my attention, aching in my jaw. I worried at a rock with my toes until it pried loose from the path. I broke a twig into smaller and smaller halves until I couldn't wait any longer, and then I rose and headed into the gully.

The path split in several directions, each of them choked with bones, piled layer upon layer until the earth below was hidden from sight. Even the trees along the ridges were bleached and skeletal, their dry limbs creaking in an unseen breeze.

A pervading unease hung in the air. Peering across the boneyard, I spotted an elk skeleton by its rack and picked my way carefully toward it. One shoulder blade stood upright, wedged through a pile of ribs. The bones shifted and groaned as I pried it loose, and I scrambled backward. The antler rack teetered over and crashed down the slope, dragging a slide of bones along with it.

From somewhere nearby, there came a rattling croak, and the *click-clack* of something hard scrabbling across bone.

I clambered into the hollowed-out trunk of an ancient willow leaning over the gully's edge and went still, holding my breath despite the burning ache in my lungs. The clatter grew louder, and my nose wrinkled at the cloying, sickly-sweet stench of rotting offal. A malevolent will blanketed my mind, forcing away all rational thought.

The clacking stopped. The willow creaked. Then there was a loud shifting of bones, followed by heavy impacts fading into the distance. The oppressive malice flooded out of me. Once I'd regained the will to move, I reclaimed my grim prize and fled. The way back was a blur, only moments seeming to pass before I reached the iron gate.

Danik was out when I returned. I started the kettle. It had just begun to steam when I heard them enter the garden and scrub their arms in the trough. I poured the tea.

"Thank you," they said as they entered the hut, and drained their cup in one long pull. They picked up the bone and turned it over in their hands. "This will do."

"What..." I began, but the words failed to form.

"You were supposed to wait until noon." Danik patted me on the shoulder. "Work now, it will help. Grind this down to the same consistency as the shells."

I went to work breaking off chunks of the bone and grinding them to dust. They were right—the repetitive motion helped still my mind of thoughts of the boneyard. Meanwhile, Danik stoked the cookfire to a roaring blaze. I worried the heat would become oppressive, but as my skin soaked in the warmth, it felt as though it was filling a cold, bleak pit I hadn't yet noticed inside me.

As I worked, Danik brought the cauldron out to the garden. I watched through the kitchen window as they unsealed the barrel. It was full of small, milky-white spheres floating in water, which they scooped into the cauldron. They hauled it back inside and hung it in the hearth. Once I'd finished with the bone, I joined them beside the fire.

"More soup?" I asked, hopeful.

"No," was all they replied.

I peered into the cauldron. The little globes were stewing away, turned translucent in the heat. Though swollen from days spent submerged in water, it was easy enough to see what they were: iris bulbs.

"It was you?" I glared at the witch. "You dug up the stardrop irises by the lake!"

They nodded.

I wiped tears from my eyes. “Why would you do that, when you knew I needed their flowers?”

Danik plunged a wooden churn into the cauldron, mashing the iris bulbs. “Because it wasn’t their flowers that you needed. Bring the pot of ash.”

Confused, I did as they asked. They ladled the boiling pulp through a strainer. It flowed thick, like the heavy cream atop a pail of milk. They stirred it into the ash, and I gasped as the mix turned a rich, crimson red, like fresh blood.

“Next!” Danik’s black eyes glittered in the firelight.

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The chalk from the allium mixed golden yellow, like a haystack hit by late summer sun. The blue of the snail shell powder matched the noon sky on a clear winter’s day. Last came the bone dust, creamy white. I watched in silence, tears streaming down my cheeks.

Their work complete, Danik set the cauldron aside and started a kettle.

“There was never any curse.” I whispered.

They smiled. “Of course not.”

“The people in the village think you are evil, and cruel, but they are wrong. They should know—”

“No,” Danik said, like the closing of a book.

“But why!”

“I told you before that vernyl are the path and the bridge between humanity and nature. But sometimes, we are instead the Iron Gate.”

A shiver ran the length of my spine, ending in my sinuses like the sting of a failed sneeze. I thought of the click-clacking in the boneyard. Of the *wrongness* of a path, a sensation felt deep within my bones.

“Do you understand what lives in this forest, Fog?”

“I do,” I whispered.

Danik nodded gravely. “Then you also understand why the villagers must fear me. Why they must only enter these woods in their most desperate need.”

I did.

I seized Danik in a hug. “Thank you,” I said.

After a moment, they returned the embrace. “Go now, child. Bring your mother her paints, and have a joyous Yulemas.”

With the waxed pots packed into my satchel, I set off into the crisp evening air. Back home in our cottage, Mother, and dinner, and my cozy sleeping pallet in the loft waited. I left the forbidden woods behind—but I had a feeling I’d be back again soon.

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