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A Humble Blessing

People flocked to the forest oasis, mostly women and the elderly, the sick and the frail. The journey to the temple was no small task, the wooded paths lined with trees with agendas of their own, vines twirling around unguarded ankles as if to ask “Play? Play?”

Life lounged in the hot springs, her golden hair and golden skin gleaming in the dappled sunlight. Water lilies swam around the springs, carrying wooden tumblers of wine to Life while dragonflies flitted about, braiding her hair.

The clear springs lay in a hidden recess in the heavily wooded valley, surrounded by small ponds and a dabbling creek full of colorful fish. The willow trees were ever silent, their drooping leaves providing little alcoves of shade while the oaks and the maples and the ash trees stood guardian over the forest, their intertwining branches either gates or walls, depending on who they decided to let pass. Foxes and rabbits darted about and a few deer lay in the grass behind the springs.

One of the oaks extended a branch, gently tapping Life on the shoulder. Her eyes flitted open, the bright green irises angry.

“What?” she asked harshly. She had left explicit instructions that she was not to be bothered on her day of rest. Then again, every day of late was her day of rest.

The tree pointed to the small clearing that served as their waiting room, the grass and branches dripping in offerings of fruit and wine and honey and small straw dolls left by those who hoped to receive Life’s blessings. Inside was an older woman, perhaps in her late forties or fifties. Her red hair had lost its vibrancy, marred with streaks of grey. She stood hunched over

slightly, her posture likely ruined from years of sewing and reading by candle light and her simple homespun dress's hemline was muddy and fraying.

"I'm clearly busy." Life grabbed her tumbler of wine, snapping at one of the lily pads to come refill it.

The oak tapped her again, crossing its branches haughtily, leaves shaking side to side. The trees were becoming exasperated with Life's daily routine.

Life rolled her eyes. "What does she want?"

The woman in the clearing was emptying a small woven basket full of berries and wildflowers and homemade mead and gently arranging them on an empty branch.

The oak tiled its head at Life. *Go talk to her. Do your duty.*

Life stood from the hot spring, knocking over the dredges of her cup of wine and sending one of the lily pads scampering. The dragonflies braiding flowers and vines into her hair flew back, the heavy wet ends of her curls sending water droplets flying every time she moved. A fluttering of pastel hued butterflies flocked to cover Life, preserving the modesty she seemed to care nothing about, if only for the sake of their guest. Humans can be so fickle about such things.

Life moved languidly, in no hurry to hear this uninvited woman's pleas. A small hummingbird came to land on her shoulder, but she quickly flicked if off. A pair of fox cubs ran across her feet, wrestling and play biting each other. She gave them a small kick. "Get," she huffed, pursing her lips as she prepared to plaster on a serene smile and pretend to give even one singular drop of concern for human affairs.

She emerged from the sentinel trees in a halo of light. Her skin glowed, a crown of wildflowers, butterflies, dragonflies, and hummingbirds adorned her voluminous curls. She was the picture of health and feminine beauty, outshone by no other goddess excepts perhaps Love, with luscious curves and full, rosy lips. Even as she entered the grove, she made sure to sashay her hips, the butterflies that acted as her skirt moving with the rhythm. The meek little human woman kneeled on the ground, bowing her head before the goddess so above her.

Life stepped onto a rock hidden in a tangle of branches, boosting her already impressive height another foot or so in order to tower over the woman. She took a long, deep breath before she spoke, and clasped her hands. To those who didn't know her, they might have thought she was shy and full of patience.

"Welcome. I understand you have made a long journey here. Might I offer you some refreshments?" Life snapped her fingers, and a trio of blue jays carrying grapes and a decanter of spring water appeared.

"N-no thank you, your majesty. I seek not to impede upon your hospitality." The corner of Life's lips quirked up. So this would be quick. Better to get back to her wine and relaxing.

"I see you have brought with you some …. Meager offerings," she said, glancing at the artful arrangement the woman had brought. It was more than most could afford and certainly showed a great amount of care and thoughtfulness in its arranging, but what were human knickknacks to a goddess?

"I wish I could afford more, but I made sure to bring you only the freshest wildflowers from the meadow near our village, and the fullest, ripest fruit from the vineyard. I made the mead myself, from the honey my bees produce, and let it steep with roses and lavender for fifty

moons. I do hope it is to your liking." The woman had yet to look Life in her eyes, her head still bowed low to the ground as if she was prepared to kiss Life's feet. The idea rather pleased Life, who so greatly adored these displays of subservience.

Life stepped slowly off the rock, extending her leg and pointing her toes like a dancer, allowing the woman a glance at her perfectly smooth calf. She approached the woman, stooped down in front of her and gently guided her chin up so that their eyes met.

"You may look at me while we speak." Tears glistened in the woman's dull brown eyes.

"I……I…" the woman stammered.

Life tilted her head. The people that made the journey to her little oasis were almost always poor, desperate beggars hoping to plead their case. Some would have fainted at a singular look or touch from the goddess, convinced that alone was enough to bless them and cure them of all their ailments. She'd heard of entrepreneuring women selling satchels of herbs or bits of lace as talismans blessed by Life, sure to guarantee health and fertility. Of course, Life wouldn't so much as think about brushing against such dirty little trinkets.

"Do go on," she smiled sweetly.

"I live by myself, away from my village. My husband and only love died shortly after our marriage, leaving me widowed at a young age. I enjoy my work, raising bees on the farm my husband inherited. It's a nice, quiet, simple existence."

Life couldn't help but think how much she would rather be continuing her nice, quiet, simple existence, away from all the entreating visitors who dared encroach upon her territory. Nevertheless, she prompted the woman to continue.

"I am quite happy, truly, with the many blessings that have already been bestowed upon me, despite the most unfortunate death of my sweet Harry. But I do so miss having a companion."

"So you want a new husband? Or perhaps for me to bring yours back to life? I'm afraid that wouldn't be possible, if his soul has already been claimed by my brother Death's domain."

The woman shook her head. "No, no. I shall love no other besides my Harry. And that is why I have come to you, rather than betraying his memory for the more…. Traditional route. I would like to be blessed with a child."

"A child?"

"To keep me company, to raise among the meadows and flowers. I would dedicate his life to you, of course. We could make yearly pilgrimages and bring you fresh honey and mead and…. oh, I know it's not much, I'm afraid I don't have much to offer. But I was so dearly hoping…." The woman trailed off, uncertain now.

Life beamed at her, the closest she got to being reassuring. "The yearly visits will hardly be necessary my dear." Heaven forbit the woman think Life actually enjoyed her presence. "The trees have already told me of how worthy you are, the bees having passed on messages of your kindness and devotion. I would be more than happy to grant you a child." The trees nodded in agreement, some of the butterflies that had hovered near Life flitting over to the woman, pressing small kisses to her cheeks and tangling in her hair.

The woman was smiling now, tears cascading down her dirt-smudged cheeks. She clasped her hands and bowed several times over. "Thank you, goddess, thank you. I will forever be…"

"Yes, yes, you are very welcome," Life dismissed the woman's obnoxious display of gratitude, waving it off before the woman had the opportunity to break out into some overly wrought speech full of grandiose promises and worse, more tears. It was not like the humans ever kept their promises anyways.

Life plucked a pebble off the ground and spat on it. "Keep this pebble in the bottom of your tea kettle with your leaves for the next week. Be careful to keep it always wet. Brew a tea with beetle wings and buttercups twice daily to drink, always at sunset and sunrise. After nine moons, you will have your child."

Life dropped the pebble unceremoniously into the woman's waiting hands and quickly turned, returning through the arch of branches to her spring.

The woman went ambling back down the forest path, smiling and laughing. How fortunate was she to have received Life's blessing! She raced to tell her village of her good fortune.

The trees muttered among themselves, their whispers in the form of rustling leaves and groaning branches. They prepared to send a few messenger squirrels to Love and Mercy.

Life dismissed the butterflies, swatting them away and yanking some of the flowers out of her hair before crushing them underfoot. She had snatched the bottle of mead the woman brought her and uncorked it with her teeth. She took a large swig as she stepped back into the bubbling waters. Not bad.

While Life returned to lounging among the waters and guzzling her many inebriations, the forest whispered and gossiped. For Life had not given the human woman, who did indeed deserve the blessings of the gods, the seed of a human child.

No, the small babe already beginning to grow within her stomach was not of flesh and blood, but rather a child of scales and wings and teeth.