

Theo loved living in the castle. Growing up, the maze of rooms, courtyards, and gardens excited him. It seemed like there were infinite combinations of places to hide, play, and spy on the nobles and servants as they came and went. After the growing up was finished, and he realized that his father would never let him leave, things lost their magic.

Leading his first hunt was his chance to get out, literally and figuratively, from prison. He had been working with his father for three years, and he still hadn't been hunting. It was the one tradition that Lord Prestel didn't want to uphold. Theo was told over and over that it would be too dangerous. He was allowed to ride horses as much as he wanted within the holdings, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't until Claire's hundredth passive-aggressive comment about Theo still being a child at fifteen that his father finally relented.

And then, after all the trust that he had built, Theo was lost. The thousand times that the young prince had promised he would be able to find his way in the wooded hills made no difference. At least the weather was good, for a mid-spring morning. Only a few puffs of a breeze whispered through the new leaves above him. He could see the sun now and then through the breaks in the canopy, and could follow it in the direction that the hunt had gone in.

Up until he found himself wandering through the trees with only the clothes on his back, things had actually been going well. The team followed signs of a group of boar all morning, skirting the edges of the Darkwood. It had been an easy trip on horseback, and everyone was laughing and telling stories. They had stopped for lunch at a small grotto, where Theo had taken off his new leather boots and dunked his feet in the freezing water. As the team was packing up, he had gone off to relieve himself among the spicebush on the other side of the brook. When he had come back, everyone was gone.

Theo's abandonment hurt him, but his hurt had bubbled up into his teenage head as a spoiled rage. This had been his hunt. The village hunters, guards, and servants were there working for him. He was supposed to be in charge. Obviously, they had assumed that he'd gone on ahead without his horse. Why hadn't they called for him? And how had they packed up that fast?

His first thought after "how could they" was that this was a trap. He had been listening to stories of how his grandparents fought back the fairies and demons that lived in the Darkwood all his life. Their rivalry was the reason Lord Prestel needed so much convincing to let Theo leave the castle. Theo had never seen a fairy, though, and he didn't really believe they existed. The Leshy goddess of the forest was just as likely to exist as the three-titted woman that Edgar the Woodsman was bragging about meeting.

As he followed the trail that the hunting party had left, he had to push those thoughts out of his mind more and more. They couldn't have wandered into the Darkwood. Humans were torn apart on sight by the trees themselves if they went there.

Theo looked up from his daydreams and realized that he was on a deer path. He tried to backtrack to the trail, but he couldn't find it and he couldn't figure out which way to go. He decided to head downhill, in the direction he thought the castle would be. He thought he would get to a path sooner or later, but he never did. He wandered until his new boots were caked in mud, and he was cursing the fact he left his waterskin tied to the saddle of his horse.

When the sun set below the hills, he also cursed the fact that he hadn't worn a coat. Claire had said how muscular he looked in his new silk shirt, with leaves embroidered on the

open collar, and he decided to ride out of town without one to show off. Now the temperature dropped, and the wind picked up. The noises picked up, too, reminding Theo of the knife on his belt. It was steel, not cold iron, so it was useless against the Leshy. It would sure mess up anyone or anything else, so he kept his hand near it as he walked.

Theo knew a little bit about navigating by the stars, but they were blocked out by trees and gathering clouds. There wasn't a single clearing in the hours he had walked. Each tiny stream he drank from was covered by the forest's canopy. He wanted to climb a tree to get a better view, but even the lower branches were out of his reach. He kept wandering, hoping he was going out of the woods, towards home, and still secretly praying that he hadn't wandered into the Darkwood.

By the time he heard the music, Theo was so tired that he stumbled towards it without thinking. The drumbeats matched his swiftly beating heart, and laughter swelled up. He would know a party anywhere, even in the middle of the woods at midnight. When he saw light shining through the trees, he crouched and listened. Flutes and strings had joined the drums, and there were voices talking softly. They sounded happy and human. Theo made the decision: if they were demons from the Darkwood (and they probably weren't) at least he wouldn't have to walk anymore.

Theo gasped as he stumbled through the underbrush into a large clearing. It was clear that this was not a group of villagers drinking in the woods.

There were at least a dozen small bonfires around the clearing, surrounded by animals that were talking in human voices. Bizarre creatures danced between the fires to the music, flutes and harps and strange stringed things that the monsters held. The sound that Theo thought was coming from drums was actually coming from the huge bellies of two warty grey creatures that were each as big as a house in the village.

In the center of the clearing was the largest stone table that Theo had ever seen. On top of it, the monsters and animals had laid out piles of food - and a woman was dancing.

She was standing on the center of the table, almost glowing in the firelight. Her body writhed as she sang. He couldn't understand the words, but he somehow knew the song was about children, or maybe the sunrise, or maybe the leaves budding on trees. It seemed to echo through him, making him feel safe and hopeful. Her long, auburn hair danced about her as she moved, as if it had a life of its own.

Theo couldn't remember moving through the crowd, but he must have, because suddenly he was at the table, looking at the piles of food. He reached for a piece of bread and bit into it. As it melted in his mouth like spun sugar, his hunger and thirst disappeared. He reached for more, but stopped himself. Hadn't he listened to fairy tales like this his entire life? This was a trick meant to lure people into the Darkwood and bind them to the monster that ruled it. This was how the Leshy found her servants.

He jumped away from the table, trying to retch, trying to get the food out of him, but nothing came up. There were gasps from around him, but the music kept playing. The woman kept singing, but turned her eyes towards him. They were a bright yellow, every shade of gold that Theo could imagine. She reached out a pale hand and beckoned to him.

The smell of magnolias washed over him, and Theo realized that it was coming from the woman. Her white dress was a million magnolia petals, and the smell was so strong that Theo

wanted to retch again, but he was frozen in place. He was trapped in the Darkwood now. The girl's gaze was fixed to his. She was seeing into his mind, and he was telling her his story – not just the story of how he was lost in the forest, but how he was born, how he grew up, his favorite stuffed animal and his father and mother and friends. His entire life flashed before his eyes.

And then, almost at the same time, the girl was telling Theo her story. This was the Leshy, the monster that he was so afraid of meeting. Theo felt a strength greater than anything he had known, but not anger. Only contentment, and love. He saw the Leshy reaching for him, saw himself taking her hand and climbing onto the stone table and dancing. Then, they were drawing close, and he was kissing her the way the bride and groom kiss at the end of a wedding. All the creatures of the forest were around them, and the stars in the sky watched, and he felt something in his stomach. Was it disgust? Curiosity? He didn't care, he was consumed by whatever was pulling him forward, towards the Leshy, their bodies pressing against each other as if they were two lumps of clay that could be combined and made into one...

Suddenly, he felt the monster's hold leave. The Leshy was staring at him, her wild hair frozen around her like a fiery halo. Her eyes were wide, and Theo could almost feel her shock. And fear. He hadn't climbed onto the table at all. They hadn't touched, but he could still feel the warmth of her pressed against him. Every hair on his body was standing on end. Had she seen what he had seen? Had he felt whatever he had felt in that moment?

Theo felt the warmth spread across his face as he stared into the Leshy's eyes. She had stopped her dance and was standing, hands clenched, body rigid. She looked... violated. As if Theo had violated her.

The eye of every creature in the clearing was on him. He had to say something. Eventually it croaked out, barely heard above the crackling of the fires.

"I... I'm sorry..."

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but Theo turned and ran. Voices rose behind him, but he didn't care. He forgot how lost and tired he had been before stepping into the circle of light. The only thing that mattered to him now was getting away from the clearing. He ran as if the horde of monsters were chasing him, but the only sound he could hear was the beating of his heart and the racket of him clumsily stumbling through the dark underbrush. When the thunder rolled and the rain started to pound down on him, he only became more frantic.

Two guards found him in the Fallow Lands under the massive oak tree that marked the trail into the Darkwood, dirty and hungry and fast asleep. When asked, he told them how he had wandered lost and seen nothing unusual. How he eventually found the old trail back to the castle, and fell asleep as soon as he was out of the cursed forest.

The other members of the castle teased Theo, saying the Goddess had punished him for wandering off from the group. He didn't even bother telling them that they had been the ones to leave him. He couldn't help but wonder if he had been called into those woods. Had he been meant to find the forest creatures' dance? To join in?

He never told anyone what really happened, not even Claire. What would he say? He would sometimes walk the curtain wall at night, looking out towards the Darkwood, but he never saw any signs of a bonfire or hear any distant drums. His dreams were haunted by the girl dressed in magnolia petals, beckoning him to join in the dance. Sometimes he danced with her. In others, they kissed and embraced like they had in his vision. Sometimes, the vision even

continued on to some fantasy dream, or it turned dark and the Leshy devoured him alive. Regardless of what happened in them, Theo woke drenched in sweat and aching with regret.