

Mockingbird Wood

A crow's singing brushes past the leaves and deep thicket of Mockingbird Wood.

Trees taller than most houses tower over the many creatures prowling through the forest. The day is cloudy with gray skies. What little the sun's light pierces is scarce. It is truly a domain of looming shadows.

At the center of a clearing is a patch lit up by the sun. Next to it is a girl with a hooded red cloak crouching down. What could be seen of her frame was dainty and doll-like. In her hands was a basket full of mushrooms, roots, and dark flowers.

The shadow of her hood covered the girl's face save for two blonde braids, but the concentration on her task was clear. Her arms moved rhythmically as they plucked plant after plant. She did not stop until the basket was full.

There was a rustle in the bushes.

For once, the girl looked away from the plants. She stood up and searched her surroundings.

Nothing.

Or at least not anymore.

The girl looked up and noticed the light getting smaller. There were no clouds, but the darkening skies said night would fall soon.

A crow cawed.

She picked up one last flower.

Turning around, she exited the clearing. A brief crunch of grass from behind her was heard, but she ignored it and kept walking.

The girl in red continued to walk until she reached a trail. A dim light shone on a path filled with fallen leaves.

Crunch.

Not even bothering to turn around, her pace quickened. She dared to turn around for an instant to look behind her and saw a pair of amber eyes in the brush before they disappeared. A hand extended towards the direction of the eyes, slowly opening as if trying to grasp something. Her other hand gently clasped its sister and tugged it down.

The girl turned around again and continued down the trail. She could feel the eyes watching her. Yet, she did not go any faster. The further she walked, the more she could feel her steps slowing, her body acting of its own accord.

She was snapped out of her trance by a melodic whistle.

Searching further down the path, her eyes settled on a tall figure in a long overcoat with a straw hat covering his head down to his ears.

It was a tall man with tawny gold hair carrying a rifle. His hat and coat seemed to glisten in the light. Steel-toed boots clacked and crunched along the forest path as he whistled a hymn.

As the girl drew closer, the hunter turned and noticed her.

Gold.

This would be the first thought many would have as they looked at him.

The hunter's hair was a shade of dark gold like a woven thread. He had a light beard of the same color. But most striking of all was his golden eyes twinkling with amusement. From his dress, he seemed more gentleman than the average hunter.

He greeted the girl in red with a friendly smile and a one-handed wave.

“Greetings, Traveler.”

She paused in place before staring at him. The girl nodded before responding.

“Hello.”

A lone word responded to the hunter with a dull tone.

Nonplussed at the monotonous voice, the man continued, “Hello to you too. I'm Rummy, just your everyday traveler who knows how to hunt a little. What brings a little girl like you to this neck of the woods? It's dangerous to go alone, especially at this time of day. There could be wolves and worse about.”

His eyes peered at their surroundings carefully while maintaining a grip on his rifle. Rummy's brow crinkled before unfurrowing.

The girl's unflinching stare remained as she answered, “Foraging.”

The hunter rubbed his chin. “Foraging, eh?” He looked at her basket. “That's quite the haul, little one. Not sure what you're doing with Belladonnas and the like, but I'm no apothecary.”

She showed no visible change in expression. “For Grandma.”

“Is that right? She’s lucky to have you then. Must be mighty proud of her little girl.”

She only nodded.

“Hmm,” he hummed. “You heading down the path, kiddo? If you are, we can walk together for a bit before we part ways. And don’t worry, you can just keep walking behind me and the like. I’m a stranger after all. So, you don’t wanna get too close. And I can keep help ya in case there’s some nasties around. That sound alright?”

She nodded again.

He smiled. “Alrighty. I’ll try to avoid being unpleasant company and keep a sharp eye out.”

Like before, she just nodded.

The two walked in silence, the sound of Rummy’s whistling and leaves crunching under their feet as their only ambiance. Any time they heard something disturb the tempo they built, they looked around. Though there was nothing but a crow’s trills to be found, they could not help feeling watched.

Further down, Rummy broke the tempo himself.

“So, this grandma of yours. Is she a doctor?” he inquired. “I can’t see many folks handling what you’ve picked too well. Even an experienced apothecary could flub with ingredients as strong as those.”

“Yes.”

“Must be one skilled doctor then.”

As they walked, Rummy noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

On a nearby tree, two bees were caught in a spider web. One was completely spun in a cocoon of silk save for its stinger. The other was not as stuck and still struggling. It faced the trapped bee and seemed to be moving towards it, spider silk weaving around it as much as its stringer broke.

The hunter shook his head with a sad sigh. “Poor little guys. One’s wrapped in silk and it doesn’t look like the other wants to leave em. Won’t be long before a spider comes back.” Gold eyes trailed off to the side. “Or a crow could get them first. You never know. Too late for a doctor to help them now though.”

The girl in red walked past him.

“Hmm? Whatcha doing, Little Red?”

Without a word, she grabbed the web and the bees before putting them in her basket.

“Foraging.”

Just like before, she answered with a dull monotone and stared back at him.

Rummy’s smile did not seem to meet his eyes.

“Right.” He looked at the trail again. “Let’s go. We’re burning daylight.”

The girl nodded at him before walking forward.

The hunter let her walk ahead of him before he moved again. Gold eyes glanced over his shoulder for a second. His lips thinned. He mimed closing a zipper over his mouth before looking forward and taking his original position.

Rummy and the girl continued their walk. Dusk had come, and both found themselves at a crossroad.

“You going left or right, kiddo?”

“Left.”

The hunter tipped his hat to his smaller traveling companion.

“Well, looks like this is where we part ways, little missy. I hope home’s not too far ahead. Sun’s almost down.”

“It isn’t.”

“Good to hear. You sure you won’t need me to bring you home though?”

“I won’t. Grandma doesn’t like surprise visitors.”

He nodded. “Okay then. Then I’ll be off. You stay safe now.” He waved her goodbye as he started going down the left trail.

The girl only stared back and said, “Goodbye,” before walking to the left. Her figure quickly disappeared in the shadows as Rummy saw her off. Above her, one could hear the flapping of wings before a caw echoed through the wood.

When she finally left, he stopped smiling. He shook his head as a single gold eye pierced the darkness and stared at space.

“You’ve met an unfortunate fate, haven’t you, kid?”

The only response to his words was a frantic rustling of leaves and a shadow quickly leaving the scene.

And followed the girl.

Back with the girl, night had fallen as she entered a humble cottage set on a corner of the woods near a river. The lights were on, and out the windows were sickly sweet scents mixed with bitter aromas. Through one of the windows, an elderly woman with a faded dress and an apron could be seen stirring a pot.

The girl approached the door and knocked.

“Grandma. I’m home.”

A series of steps and a soft clack could be heard as feet creaked on a wooden floor.

The elderly lady opened the door. She greeted the girl with a fond smile and a walking cane in hand.

“Ah, welcome home my child. I hope Grandma’s errand didn’t tucker you out too much.”

The girl shook her head.

Grandma’s smile widened. “Wonderful. Now, could you show Grandma your basket?”

A nod. The wicker basket was handed to her.

Inspecting its contents, Grandma recited the names of the ingredients.

“Atropa Belladonna, Wisteria, Hyacinths, Monkshood...ah.” Her eyes twinkled in delight.

Grandma pulled out a black rose with a stem covered in thorns. It seemed to bleed an inky substance at her touch.

“I was doubtful if you could find this, but you have done well, my child.” Her smile widened at the sight of the bees and web. “And you even brought live samples. How kind.” She patted the girl on the head.

The girl nodded. “Dinner?”

“Ah, yes. Come inside, and Grandma will have your food on the table soon. I made your favorite, Meat Pies.” She waggled a finger in front of her. “Remember to take your hood off at the table, Dearie. It’s poor manners to cover up your pretty little face like that.”

The girl nodded. Her hands went to her hood and removed it.

Staring back at Grandma was the expressionless face of a petite girl with long blonde hair in braids.

And dull green eyes completely glazed over.

Grandma's smile stretched across her face. "Good girl." She handed the child the basket again. "Now go and set that on the table. Grandma will be with you in a bit. Make sure to eat lots and lots, Gretel."

Gretel nodded and walked into the house without a word.

Grandma closed the door behind her and took a few steps forward. She closed her eyes then took a deep breath.

"Aaahhh....The cool air of the wood at night feels good on these lungs, doesn't it...Dog?"

Her voice gained a cold edge.

A dog's whine was heard as the leaves rustled again.

Cane clacked against dirt.

A field of thorns erupted around the house.

The pitter-patter of paws striking dirt echoed through the night, a sleek shadow raced over the ground, barely leaving a trail in what little moonlight touched the house.

Grandma shook her head with pity.

Her cane tapped the earth again.

The sound of trees being uprooted, and dirt being shifted en masse exploded.

A cry of pain rang out.

Grandma slowly approached a large entanglement of roots covered in thorns. Her slipper-clad feet leisurely walked over the debris and approached a figure snared in the roots.

A cloud parted and allowed a ray of moonlight to shine over the area, allowing Grandma a clear look at her target.

A large grey wolf was gnawing at the roots holding him in place even as the thorns pierced his hide. His fur was matted in blood and dirt dripping onto the surroundings. The claws and fangs he possessed looked sharper than a sword's point.

Green eyes stared at Grandma in defiance and hate.

THWACK

Grandma's cane struck the wolf across the face.

"Such a rude child. Even as a beast, you still have not learned any manners, have you, Hansel?"

Hansel growled at her.

Grandma only tsked and shook her head again. "Hah. What should I do with you? You were smarter than your sister, so I thought you would leave us be. But you just could not leave well enough alone, could you?"

He snapped at her only for a muzzle of thorns to squeeze his jaw shut.

Grandma tapped him over the head again. "I do commend you for managing to find us though. The journey must have been long. Oh, to be so far from home. I can only imagine the adventure you must have had." She ran a hand through his mane with an air of pity and derision. "How sad that this will be the last time you see us."

A crow cawed and flew into view. Black wings flapped and left dark feathers in its wake before settling on Grandma's shoulder. She rubbed the bird's beak playfully before standing up.

"I believe I've made poor Gretel wait long enough. It's almost dinner time."

She turned her back on Hansel and walked away.

All the roots subsided and disappeared into the earth.

The wolf was freed. Instead of running, he rushed towards Grandma and leaped out with his jaw aiming for her throat.

Cane tapped against the earth.

A wooden stake shot from the ground and pierced through the wolf's abdomen, leaving him to hang in the air as he struggled.

Grandma looked back at him. "Oh, you're still alive? How tenacious." She opened the door to the house and walked in. "But I'm afraid this is goodbye. If you survive, Hansel, I hope you'll be a dear and learn some manners."

She closed the door.

A tap.

The house was bathed in malicious green light before turning into a noxious mist which soon faded away.

Hansel could only stare at the space where the house used to be as he howled in pain and fury.

A crow's sharp trill echoed through the woods in a hypnotic song. It took delight in the poor wolf's agonized howl. To all who heard the crow's singing, it most resembles a laugh, one of mockery.

A mocking laugh from a mocking bird.

Hansel struggled to free himself as more blood left his body. It was a miracle he was not dead yet.

A paw was slowly raised before it went down with all the strength he could muster.

The stake snapped in two as Hansel hit the dirt. Green eyes trailed towards the half of the stake still lodged in his body.

He growled before pausing.

A trail of gold dust drifted in front of his eyes. The crunching of leaves entered his ears as a voice called out.

“An unfortunate fate indeed.”

A man with gold hair and eyes entered the clearing and approached the wolf. He stared back at the man who knelt next to him.

“That’s gotta hurt,” Rummy remarked. “I think I’ll give you a freebie.”

He placed a hand on the stake and snapped his fingers. The wood impaling him turned into gold dust before covering Hansel’s wound.

The wolf looked at him skeptically and growled as if to ask, “What’s the catch?”

Rummy held his hands in front of him before shaking his head. “Hey now. No need to be hostile.”

Hansel stared at him in question.

Rummy dusted himself off. “You wanna get down to business huh? Not a bad quality. I like that.” He grinned. “So, I’ll get to the point.”

The man tipped his hat towards the wolf, revealing a set of pointed ears, as his gold eyes twinkled.

“Name’s Rummy, short for Rumpelstiltskin.” His grin was full of teeth. “And boy do I have a deal for you.”