

opening extract from

the witch's boy

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WITCH

Once upon a time, in a faraway country, there was a woman who lived by herself in the middle of a great forest. She had a little cottage and kept a garden and a large grey cat. In appearance, she was neither fair nor ugly, neither young nor old, and she dressed herself modestly in the colours of stones. None of the folk who lived nearby (not the oldest of them) could tell how long she had dwelt in that place.

One spring morning, the woman set off to collect some plants she needed. As she glided silently along, she studied a list she had made, for she tended to be absent-minded about small things. She passed the old oak tree, lightning killed and half hollow, where the local people were accustomed to leave things for her, and there she heard an odd little cry. She stopped and looked, and saw that in the hollow was a wicker basket. Have they left me a piglet? she wondered. But when she came closer, the basket shook and she heard the unmistakable cry of a new baby. There was a note in a crude hand tied to the handle of the basket, which read:

"Well, well," said she to herself, "let us see what some rude person has left." She opened the basket and looked in. "Oh, my!" she said aloud, as she beheld the ugliest baby boy that she, and perhaps anybody, had ever seen. He had a piggish snout and close-set eyes of a peculiar yellowish colour. His mouth, wide and floppy, was already full of square little grinders. He was covered in coarse dark hair resembling the bristles of a hog; and his ears were huge and pointed like a bat's. His body was also oddly shaped, like a sack of stones, and his feet were far too large. Of all his features, his hands alone might be called good, their long delicate fingers flexing as the stubby arms waved.

He seemed healthy enough, and when the woman reached down and touched his cheek with the backs of her fingers, he gave a lusty cry and rooted with his mouth for her thumb.

"Hungry, are you?" she asked. "Don't you know that witches are supposed to eat babies, not feed them?" The ugly baby gurgled and pushed harder against her hand. His yellow eyes looked hungrily into her grey ones. She felt a magic older than even her own flicker between them, and it startled her.

"What am I thinking of?" she said. "How could I keep a baby? I have never been sentimental before." She

addressed the baby. "You will make a meal for the lynx or the grey wolf. This is your fate." She moved her hand away and turned to go, but the little thing, feeling the withdrawal of the woman's warm presence, began to whimper again. In an instant, almost without thought, she had drawn the baby into her arms and pressed him to her bosom. The baby gurgled and stared with mindless intensity into her eyes.

"Ah, well." She sighed. "It seems we are stuck together, little lump. I have no idea how we shall get on or what will become of you. I have never heard of a woman of my sisterhood rearing a child before, but lately the world is full of new and disturbing things – and perhaps this is one of them, dropped into my very lap. Perhaps we shall both learn something from it."

She placed the child carefully back in his basket, and carried it back the way she had come. The few people she passed all nodded cautiously at her and made room on the path; but none attempted to start a conversation, as they might have with almost anyone else. The people of that neighbourhood were woodcutters, trappers, charcoal burners, and a few farmers who worked the small clearings. They thought her strange; she had the disconcerting habit of appearing without warning around the turn of a path, or you might be working and suddenly be aware of her presence in a corner of your sight, like smoke from a distant fire. You could not hear her coming, not even in autumn, when the very rabbits

made a crunching as they travelled their underbrush roads. Although she greeted people politely on these occasions, she was short of speech and soon glided onwards, out of sight. Her voice was deep and clear and not accented with the local twang. She kept no company, nor did she trade, as far as anyone could see.

Tongues wagged about her, of course, as they will in a small place. One fellow said he saw her pop out of a cleft in a rock in broad day, and when he looked for a passage or cave had found nothing but the smooth black stone. Another said she had seen her walking with the shy roe deer often and once with an enormous brown bear, chatting away and pausing as if to listen, as if she were conversing about the weather or the year's chestnuts. The local boys dared each other to go down the path to her cottage and peer in the windows at night. None ever did, although they lied a good deal about it. Some of the older women brought little baskets of fruit or crocks of cream or preserves and left them in the hollow tree by the head of her path, where today someone had left a more strange and less welcome gift. The rough men of the forest left in that same place clever fur bags they made of whole marten skins or stone jars of the spirit they distilled from elderberries in the autumn while they waited for the ricks to burn down. These were plain people who still felt the weirdness of life's twists, and, God-fearing though they might be, they were also in the habit of making small sacrifices to

keep on the good side of powers more strictly local.

They made up stories about the woman, to pass the evenings and frighten the children into bed: how she could change her shape, becoming a raven or a red fox, how she could sour milk with a glance or spoil traps, what she did in her cottage to little boys and girls who did not mind their elders. These tales grew richer with the years; in the end, they called her a witch.

Such things used to happen often to women living alone and mostly no harm done, although when some old goose is treated as a witch and given little presents, she may get it into her head that she really has the power to make rain drop from the sky or two people fall in love, and then she might find herself in trouble.

But this particular woman was a real witch.

She was not wicked; but neither did she often go out of her way to do good. She was like some venerable mountain that in winter holds a cap of snow, which at any moment might send forth an avalanche. Around such a crag, therefore, one ought to walk tiptoe, although ordinarily the snow will relax into the full streams of spring without troubling the country.

This woman had a name, but no one in the forest knew it; a good thing, too, for if any there had uttered it, their tongues would have been scorched from their heads along with a good portion of the surrounding country. The people called her the Quiet Woman or Mrs Forest or, more commonly, with a peculiar roll of the

eyes or a shake of the head, "That One" or "Her". Everyone knew which Her was meant.

What the woman actually did with her time was quite different from what the people imagined. She did not ride on a broom nor visit the devil nor dine on children. Mostly she studied the world, both the parts that we all see – made up of rocks and flowers and rain and beetles – and the parts we don't see but which we may sometimes feel by a prickle of the scalp and a shiver down the back when we stand in a rustling wood and the clouds race across the full moon.

She knew how to listen. Even the stones had no secrets from her. Not only could she hear the words of animals, which many people can do, but also the voices of the flowers in the fields and the trees of the woods. And she could speak their various languages as well, and so was able to learn the secret wisdom locked in the great river of life that runs unbroken back to the making of the world.

With what she learned, she made magic and not just what we think of as magic nowadays – making the small large and the large small, making the soft hard and the hard soft, making up and down change places – although she could do that and more with less effort than you make to scratch your nose. No, what she spent most of her time doing was so strange that even the memory of the words that describe it has utterly vanished. You might say, if you had to say something,

that she adjusted the pattern of things so that life flowed smoothly through time, the sun becoming the sunflower seed and the sunflower seed becoming the mouse, the mouse becoming the weasel and the weasel becoming the horned owl, the horned owl becoming the carrion fly, and round and round, ever changing, the patterns crisp and balanced as they danced to the unknowable tune.

To hear the sound of that tune was what the woman lived for. It was her life's work and her only pleasure. Lately, its sound had become fainter. The woman worried about it; she felt changes coming, but distantly, like the clang of an axe on the other side of the mountain. There were more people coming into the forest, for one thing. A village had grown into a real town at the forest's edge; it was sending out roads like the cables of a spider, and where the roads went farmsteads grew mushroom-like into actual villages, filled with strangers who scoffed at the old ways. It made her irritable, and she worked ever harder.

The local people had no idea of any of this, of course, although part of what she did touched their lives. They called it luck; and indeed the forest was a lucky place. The trappers' traps were full enough to earn them a living selling furs, yet many animals escaped them. The woodsman's axe bit true, so the tree always fell in just the right place and in falling threw its seed into the most fecund cranny of earth. The horses never slipped at

their chains, so the logs skidded neatly into the river, and hardly a jam slowed them in their passage to the mill. The cows in the little farms gave without stint; the hens were prodigious layers; and the local butter, cheese, and eggs were famous in the towns that bordered the forest. All this came from what the woman did, although indirectly, as the fire from a great forge will help to hatch the eggs of the swallows nesting in the rafters high above.

Now, carrying the basket with the baby in it, she returned to her cottage. It was a small high house, made of weathered wood. It had a steep thatched roof, and it rested on a foundation of dark stone, cleverly locked together without mortar. One corner was supported by a living oak tree; and the door and door frame bore carved figures – serpentine forms of women, men, and animals. These figures were not always in the same place each time you looked at them. Besides that, the woman's home appeared to be an ordinary cottage of the district.

A large, ragged grey cat with grape-green eyes was sunning himself on the warmed stone of the front step, and as she approached he looked up. His whiskers twitched when he saw the basket she carried.

"I hope that's something to eat," said the cat.

"It most certainly is not," said the woman. "It's a baby. See?" She placed the basket on the ground and opened the cover. The cat peered in at the baby, now asleep.

"What fun!" said the cat, grinning. "Are you going to chase it and tear it to pieces?"

"What an idea!" the woman exclaimed. "I'll do no such thing." She paused and regarded the cat closely. "And neither will you. I mean it, Falance. If I find one scratch on this child –" she leaned over and put her face close to the cat's "– I'll turn you into a *dog*."

The cat shuddered and began washing himself in the offhand manner of cats who have been embarrassed and don't wish to acknowledge the fact.

Between licks he said, "Well, then, what do you propose to do with the thing?"

"I shall bring it up, of course. It will live here with us."

The cat stared at her, aghast. "What!" he cried. "Impossible! Whatever has possessed you?" At this, he stopped, frozen. Then he placed his forepaws against the woman's knees and stared deeply into her eyes.

"You're not, are you?" asked the cat hesitantly. "Possessed?"

"Oh, of course not, you nincompoop," she snapped. "I'm perfectly fine." She brushed the cat aside, picked up the basket, and stalked into the cottage. The ground floor was mainly one large room, with a hearth and latticed windows on the three other sides. Chairs and a round table stood in the centre of the room, with cupboards for dishes and things against the walls, and a bookcase that went up to the low ceiling. The tabletop

was littered with twisted bits of paper holding herbs and seeds; dried bunches of plants; coloured glass vials, some containing liquids, others with shrivelled brownish objects in them; a tilting stack of leather-bound books; and a quill pen stuck in an ink bottle. The woman cleared a space with a sweep of her arm and set the basket down on the table.

She turned to the cat, who had followed her in, and said, "This baby was flung at me like a curse. By taking it in, I avert this curse and carve a different channel in fate. Who knows where it may reach? Besides, I have always wanted to raise a child. Was that a snigger, Falance?"

"Not at all. Perhaps a hair ball." The cat jumped up on the table and peered into the basket again. "Charming creature," he observed. "Something like a pig, something like a bat. Aren't babies supposed to be pretty?"

"He will grow out of it," said the woman confidently. "It is a stage they all go through."

The cat gave her a sharp, incredulous look, which the woman did not catch. Instead, she took the baby from his basket and sat down in a comfortable chair, cuddling him in what she imagined was a maternal way. She had no experience with babies at all, having come into her vocation at a very early age and never having been interested in any aspect of what she had regarded as a messy business. How messy she now found out; the

baby had not been tended for some time and stank. Nevertheless, she maintained the pose, largely for the benefit of the cat, who was watching the demonstration with a baleful eye.

"You're actually serious about this?" said the cat.

"Yes, I am," she replied. "There is no reason I can't be a mother. After all . . ."

"*Be* a mother? My lady, you *are* the Mother—"

"Don't be blasphemous, cat!" she shot back. "At my best, I am merely Her shadow on earth."

"I beg your pardon," said the cat with more sincerity than was his wont. "But think, my lady! What about our work? Who will watch the baby when we are away? Who will feed it when it's hungry? Shall we halt our journeying among the worlds because you must change its sopping clothes? And, again, this house is not a safe place, not a domestic place, as you well know. You know how hard it is to guard ourselves. How, then, will we protect a helpless kitten?"

"Baby," said the woman. On her smooth, wide forehead, two deep vertical lines had appeared.

The cat saw this and pressed his case again. "Lady, I have served you all my life, which through your good grace has been longer by far than cats are used to living, and I say: what you will, I will; but, I beg you, think on this!"

The lines on her forehead faded, and her face took on a more determined look with a tight knotting around

her jaw. "I *have* thought, Falance, and my mind is settled. But all that you say is true; it will be hard on us and on our art."

At that moment, as if by way of demonstration, the infant's gurgling became the full cry of a hungry baby.

"It starts," remarked the cat in a low voice.

The woman rose and jiggled the baby absently. She said, "You are right about one thing, cat. It will definitely require a nurse. Now, who shall it be?"

Baby on hip, she strolled out into the garden and lifted her free hand above her head, palm uppermost. A brown sparrow flew down from its perch on the eaves of the house and lighted on her finger. She brought the little bird close to her lips, whispered briefly, and then tossed it into the air.

In less than three minutes, the sound of creaking boughs and snapping twigs broke from the wood, followed soon by the appearance of an immense brown bear. With heavy tread, the animal approached the woman and stared into her face, which was only a little higher than its own.

"You called, my lady?" asked the bear, in a voice stranded between a cough and a thundery rumble.

"Yes, Ysul. Thank you for coming so quickly. I have a favour to ask."

"At your command, madam."

The woman held the squalling baby before the bear's nose. "This is my own dear child," she said, "and he

needs a nurse. I would like you to care for him as if he were one of your own cubs."

The bear squinted at the baby through nearsighted eyes and sniffed it all over. "Of course. I would be honoured," replied the bear. "A very healthy and strong-smelling infant, if I may say so, madam. What is its name?"

"Name? Well, of course, I haven't had time to find out his proper Name. In the meantime, I think . . . *Lump* will serve."

"Lump it shall be. Now, as to arrangements, will I be staying here or at the den?"

"Oh, here, by all means. Please, how discourteous of me! Do come in. Door, there! Open!"

At the woman's command the door frame writhed and stretched to admit her and the bear. She darted forward and moved a chair. "You'll have to stay here by the stove for the while until I can get an addition built. A nursery, in fact. Imagine that! But, oh my! Listen to him wail! Could you give him his milk?"

"Of course," said Ysul. The bear waddled over to the indicated corner and settled herself comfortably. The woman placed the baby, Lump, on the immense living rug, with his mouth convenient to a nipple. Immediately he began to imbibe the rich milk, nor was he quiet about it.

The woman watched with satisfaction. "I trust it will agree with him," she said. "They do say bear's milk is the best."

"I have never doubted it, madam," said the bear. "One question, though, if you please. Is he to be raised as a bear or as a man?"

"Oh, at this point it hardly matters," replied the woman, gazing fondly at the nursing baby, who, if truth be told, resembled a baldish bear cub more than he did a human infant. "Use your own judgement in such matters."

The bear nodded. The cat, who had observed all from a pantry shelf, sniffed and began to wash himself in disgust. At this moment, the sun lifted over the tops of the tall trees that ringed the cottage clearing and sent a shaft of buttery light into the room.

"Oh, my!" said the woman.

"You forgot about the star grass, didn't you?" said the cat snidely. "While you were being a mother. And it has to be picked before noon, or it's no good—"

The woman shot him a look that made the fur stand up along his spine. "Cat, I'm warning you . . ." she began, and then, throwing up her hands, she turned and dashed toward the door, which barely had time to get out of her way. A moment later she stuck her head through the window and addressed the she-bear. "Ysul, take good care of baby, and I'll be back in no time. I must fly!" She vanished from the window; shortly thereafter, a large raven flew over the tops of the trees toward the west.

The cat dropped from the shelf and padded over to the

bear and her charge. Wrinkling his nose, he remarked, "Ysul, I hear that bear cubs are born unformed, so that their mothers must lick them into the proper shape. If so, you will wear your tongue out on this one."

"I will not dignify that with a reply," answered the bear.

"But seriously, Ysul, you're a sensible creature. Tell me what can have got into her to have brought such a misshapen manikin into our house? I fail to understand it."

"For me, I do not even try to understand her. Nor should you, cat."

"Still, you agree it makes no sense," the cat persisted.

"Not to you it doesn't," the bear responded shortly, "but that is why she is the Woman of the Forest and you are only a cat. Now, be quiet and let me get this child to sleep!"

The woman returned, not after a few moments, as she had said, but near dusk. She was breathless and redolent of leaf mould and cut vegetation. She threw off her grey cloak and knelt beside the bear. Little Lump was asleep in a crook of a furry forelimb. The woman touched his cheek lightly and said, "I see all seems to be well. It only remains to construct the nursery."

Then she rose and lifted to her lips a silver whistle that hung from a chain around her neck and blew upon it three uncanny notes. Immediately there sounded a great groan from behind the house, followed by a

curious sliding noise, as if a gang of workmen were dragging a heavy crate up a ramp. Then the door opened, and there entered such a creature as, if glanced at but once, would make for a lifetime of nightmares. It was not merely that it had tusks and horns and an indeterminate number of glowing, sparking, spinning eyes. No, what made it so awful was that it kept changing the number, shape, and position of its various features, so that its face was like the roiling surface of a cannibal's stewpot. Just as one had got used to one face and concluded that nothing could be more hideous, it slithered into another, and it always was. The only constant in this phantasmagoria was a bright-blue bushy beard. Its body was in general the size and shape of a very large man's, although the number and position of the limbs was subject to some variation. Its skin was iridescent, the colour of the scum on an abandoned canal.

He was an afreet, a kind of demon that inhabits desert places, and his name was Bagordax. He had been sent to the woman many years ago by an evil wizard far to the south, who desired a certain charm that she possessed. But the woman had tricked the afreet (which is another story) and pinned his tail in a cleft boulder, where it now remained. The woman used the afreet occasionally as a servant, to do heavy work. He was not a good servant, but since he was impossible to release without causing great harm, the woman put up with his ways.

Bagordax entered the room, dragging his boulder, and made an elaborate bow.

"Sister of the moon, all-knowing, queen of sorcery: Bagordax, prince of djinns, greets thee and waits upon thy whim!"

"Oh, stop doing that!" the woman snapped. "I can't think when you're writhing in that disgusting manner."

The afreet settled his form into mere monstrosity.

"That's better," said the woman. "My whim, as you put it, is to have an addition built on to the cottage. I have a child to raise now, and he must have his own little nursery."

The monster's gaze darted around the room until it fell upon Ysul and the baby. An expression of hideous delight crossed his face. Ysul pulled the baby closer to her, growled softly, and showed a fang. Bagordax turned to the woman.

"Oh, majesty, before the night has passed, a jewel-encrusted palace shall stand here with gardens and fountains, suitable for this handsomest of all princes and a wonder to the world. Yet it cannot be a tenth of what it should be for such a thrice-blessed infant while the full scope of my art is stunted by this slight embarrassment of stone that clings to thy servant's tail. Release me now, and I swear by all the Powers that—"

"Oh, do shut up, Bagordax!" said the woman impatiently. "Now, take heed! No palace, no jewels. Just a room. Large and airy, with windows on three walls. A

door leading to this room and one leading outside to the garden. Painted walls. Carpeted floors. Furniture suitable to a child and a bear. And, Bagordax—"

"Yes, serene one?"

"No tricks. If anything nasty turns up in that room, you'll find your head in that stone along with your tail. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystalline, highness, like unto the River Styris when it falls cascading into the Pools of Ixmir, like—"

"Enough! Begone!"

The demon abased himself again and backed out of the room, its boulder rumbling.

The woman fell into a chair and sighed. "I don't see why domestic arrangements always become so complicated. Including a child in a household cannot be any more difficult than – than—"

Her thought was interrupted by a cattish cough from the pantry shelf. She turned to find Falance gazing at her with an expression even more smug than was usual.

"Yes, Falance. Did you have a comment?"

"My lady," purred the cat, "it may have slipped your notice, but in less than an hour it will be moonrise and the moon is full tonight."

The woman shot to her feet and clapped hands to her cheeks in alarm. "Oh, blast! And I had it written down, too."

It was, in fact, astounding that the woman had forgotten this; the moon is as essential to magic as seed

is to a farmer. It was the most powerful indication of how the arrival of the baby had upset the woman's schedule.

"I have no doubt that it is written down somewhere," said the cat. "Perhaps the note is under the bear. In any case, do you intend to work, or will you be rocking the cradle?"

"Falance, one more word . . ." said the woman menacingly.

"I beg your pardon," said the cat smoothly. "Merely a figure of speech. Nevertheless . . ." He indicated with a movement of his head the waning light at the window.

"Yes, I know, I know! Give me a moment." She went over to the bear, moved a fold of fur away from the sleeping Lump, and kissed his cheek. The kisses of witches are supposed to be icy cold. This is a lie, or was in the case of this particular witch. It was as warm as any baby could wish. Lump stirred comfortably in his furry nest and blew a tiny bubble.

"Ysul," said the woman, "take care now. I'll be back before the dawn. Mind that Bagordax does his work and doesn't make a wreckage."

The bear grunted sleepily in assent. The woman gathered up some necessary items in a woven bag and went out into her garden. A breeze had sprung up with the setting of the sun, and it brought the scent of new grass, pear blossoms, and violets. The frogs were

starting to peep by the river. The woman dropped her head and started to focus her powers. She found it more difficult than usual. Thoughts of the day's odd events disturbed her concentration, and she could not help thinking about the child and how strange it was that she, for so long the unchanging centre of all change, should be herself transformed. She found herself longing to be with the baby.

"Well," she said to herself, "I'll be able to spend more time with him when he's older."