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Opening extract from

Barefoot on the Wind

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One

There is a monster in the forest, whispered the trees.

"I know, Sister." I patted the vast trunk of an ancient cedar with one sun-browned hand as I passed. "I know."

The tree shuddered a little. I turned away to crouch by the body of the serow I had just brought down. Its thrashing and struggling had already stopped. My fingers sank into the soft, greyish fur as I turned it over and looked down into the animal's swiftly clouding eyes. I did not fool myself that its death had been painless – how could death ever be without agony? – but my arrow was embedded deeply in the mountain antelope's heart. It had only suffered for a moment in its passing. That was the best I could do. The animal's death had been necessary, vitally necessary, to our survival. "Thank you," I said quietly.

The serow's meat, hung and cured, would feed us for

many days. Its pelt would make a warm blanket and perhaps mittens for the coming winter. The horns and bones would become a multitude of useful tools. I had seen little game today, and I was already perilously close to the ever-shifting edge of the Dark Wood that encircled the village. The small preserve of trees where it was safe to hunt was anxious, shivering and creaking around me, warning me from wandering deeper.

Digging my knee into the crisp fallen leaves, I pulled the arrow free from the animal's body, examined the horn arrowhead for damage, then wiped it off and, after unstringing my bow, slid both into the quiver strapped to my back. I lifted the serow with a grunt of effort, draping its weight across both my shoulders. A glance down reassured me that the brace of small birds from my snares was still securely attached to the belt of my leather leggings. I turned and made for home. Around me, the trees sighed with relief, leaves shaking gently, as I moved away from the edge of the Dark Wood.

There is a monster in the forest, the trees murmured gently.

"I hear," I told them, weaving swiftly between their trunks. There was no real need for stealth now, but my bare feet, tanned as tough as leather, made little noise. "I hear, Sisters. I'm going."

It was a long walk back to the valley. The other village hunters, working in their pairs, would have sung on their way home, laughed raucously, whooped and cried

out, breaking the forest quiet so that no spells could creep over them. But I hunted alone. My hunting-partner was gone, and no one else would take his place; it would be bad luck. The soft pattering of rain in the thick tree canopy and the furtive fluttering and shifting of animals and birds in the branches were my only company.

I paused on the ridge at the edge of the trees to catch my breath, heartened by the glow of fires flickering to life in the deepening darkness below. Evening drew in early at the bottom of the valley.

Rain billowed over the autumn red of the peaks and drifted down onto our steeply stacked rice terraces, mingling with the mist rising up from the river. The small cluster of houses, with their thickly thatched triangular roofs, seemed to huddle together around the swiftly flowing water, as if for companionship. There were less than fifty of them now, though there had been three or four times that number in my grandmother's youth.

A collective shout followed by a burst of laughter drew my eyes downwards, past the animal pens, to where a small group of village children defied the cold. They crouched on the smooth stones of the river shallows, skinny brown legs drawn up like those of the frogs they hunted. One stood on her tiptoes, arms held aloft in triumph, hands cupped around her prize. The ragged hem of her yukata, which had been tucked carelessly into the obi around her waist to keep it dry, was slipping loose, the pale fabric splattered with mud. I felt a sharp pang

beneath my breastbone as I remembered the last time I had played at frog hunting.

The empty space at my side – the place where my hunting-partner should have stood – seemed to throb like a new bruise, sending a ripple of sick, cold misery through my soul.

Kyo, Kyo, where are you? Where did you go?

Why didn't you come home, my brother?

Because of you, Hana. All because of you.

I exhaled the familiar pain slowly, and fixed my eyes on the lights of home.

Bracing my knees against the sharp incline of the ridge, I moved downhill, passing the rotting, picked-clean carcasses of two houses that had been abandoned before I was born. No need to wonder why their families had left them. Too close to the forest. Too dangerous. A tangle of pine saplings poked through the green timbers: the wood trying to reclaim the land which we had forsaken.

Two people had already been taken this year, and it wasn't even winter yet.

There is a monster… the young trees warned as I walked by.

"Yes, Sisters," I replied, hefting my burden higher on my shoulders as a shiver snaked down my spine. "Thank you for the warning."

My back and arms ached dully, and now that I was out from under the shelter of the leaves, the rain caught in my hair and drizzled down my face, and wet dirt

squelched between my toes. The serow's weight made my steps heavy.

Firelight glowed a soft orange-gold between the gaps in the shutters of my house, welcoming me as I unloaded the antelope, the brace of birds and the rough sack that held my day's foraging onto the porch. With a stretch and a muffled groan of relief, I laid my precious bow and quiver down beside them. I would oil the wood and leather and check my fletchings later.

Our house had once stood neatly at the centre of the village. Now we were its furthest outpost. In the last two years five more families had abandoned their old homes, moving further away from the forest and closer to the perceived safety of the water. And, although no one had ever said it aloud, further away from us.

No one was keen to be close neighbours with such an unlucky family.

Hearing my movements, my mother pushed back the kitchen screen. Her vivid amber gaze checked me over for signs of damage as I washed my feet, using a small stone cup to scoop up icy, clean water from the narrow trough. Dirt and leaf mould coursed away from my skin into the soft moss under the porch.

Wordlessly, Mother handed me a cloth. It was threadbare and rough but so warm that I knew she must have kept it folded on the hearth for me after she had lit the fires. I smiled up at her as I dried my face and ran the cloth over my damp hair, then jerked my head sideways expectantly.

She turned to look, and her eyes widened at the sight of the serow.

"Hana," she said, voice soft with awe as she knelt to run her fingers through the soft fur. "No one has seen one for months!"

"I was lucky," I told her, hitching myself up to sit on the edge of the porch to dry my now clean feet. "There's a pheasant and two pigeons there, as well. And check the sack."

She reluctantly stopped stroking the serow's pelt and opened the rough pouch to reveal a bounty of prized golden mushrooms. She let out a soft breath and lifted her head to look at me, arching a brow.

"It was a good day," I said, twitching one shoulder as I slipped my geta sandals on. The wooden soles were worn in the exact shape of my feet, and the cloth straps were soft, but still they felt heavy and restrictive after a day running barefoot. There was a short silence.

"You went to the edge again, didn't you?"

"Mother—"

"Hana."

"The other village hunters were too greedy this year. They've picked everything near to the valley clean, and the game is wary."

"We can make do. You're on your own out there. What if you ran into a wild boar? What if you walked too far by accident, or the edge of the Dark Wood shifted—"

"There are no boar left," I said wearily, looking at her

over my shoulder. "No one's seen an animal more fearsome than a deer in fifty years. And the friendly trees would warn me before I ever got too close to the edge of the Dark Wood." I did not let my eyes waver from hers even when her expression flickered with uneasiness.

My mother had never heard the trees speak. Nor did she wish to. It was a gift that my grandmother had passed onto my father and me. And I was the only one who still used it.

Useful as such petty gifts were – a certain knack for getting pigs to go where they were wanted, the ability to sense fish hiding under rocks – and common as they had once been in many families, most people in the village preferred to pretend that they did not exist nowadays. I suppose we had learned the hard way that anything uncanny could be dangerous.

My gift meant I could never stumble into the cursed wood that ringed our village, enclosing us within the small pocket of trees where it was still – mostly – safe to walk and hunt. Not by accident. Not even with my eyes closed.

"We needed this," I said firmly. "You know we did."

Mother carefully laid the mushrooms down and shuffled towards me on her knees, the much-mended fabric of her old blue kimono catching on the planks of wood. She grazed my cheek gently with the backs of her fingers. "Not as much as we need you."

The cold, ever-present sadness of the empty space beside me – inside me – eased, warmed by her affection.

I felt grateful tears sting my lashes and ducked my head. When I looked up again, she had already collected the birds and mushrooms and was rising stiffly to her feet to re-enter the kitchen.

"I will deal with these. Go fetch your father and he will clean and skin the serow, and hang it." She paused. "We shan't speak of this."

My tense muscles eased with relief. That meant she wouldn't tell my father where I had caught the antelope and gathered the mushrooms. We both knew that he wouldn't think to ask unless she brought it up. I wasn't entirely sure what he would do if he knew I had walked the edge of the Dark Wood. He might fly into one of his rare, cold furies. He might not blink an eye. I didn't know which would be worse, and I was not eager to learn.

"Tell him not to tarry," she added more briskly, reaching for her treasured cleaver, the one with a metal blade that had been sharpened down to a thin sliver over years of use not just by her, but by her mother, and her mother's mother before that. The steel was the same colour as the lone pale streak in her neatly coiled hair. "Night is almost here, and the Moon is dark tonight."

"Yes, Mother," I replied, letting my tone say, *I love you.*

The crinkle of fine lines around her eyes answered, *I love you too, Daughter.*

The quiet happiness of being understood helped me set my sandalled feet onto the freshly swept stone path that led to my father's workshop. On the way, I unfolded

my kimono and plain nagajuban from the obi which had held them up out of the way for my day's hunting. The material, soft with years of washing, fell around my legs with a faint *whoosh*, veiling my leggings from sight. I ran my fingers lightly over my tightly plaited hair, brushing back the few stray strands from my face, and took a deep breath as I reached the closed door of the workshop. My posture altered, stiffening into the correct, straight stance of a dutiful daughter. I tapped on the door.

"Father?"

A long pause, punctuated with small noises: a rattle as some tool was laid down in a ceramic dish, a hollow sliding as something wooden shifted. Overhead, a robin let out a sweet, mournful trill.

"Enter."

I pushed open the door slowly, carefully. "Mother sent me to fetch you."

My father sat at his bench with his back to me, although his work – a wooden shutter from one of the elder's houses by the look of it – had been carefully moved aside. One of our precious pig-fat candles guttered by his wrist. The flame limned his shadowy profile in gold as he turned his head, and cast direct light on the long, slender lines of his fingers. Kyo's hands had been like that.

Father was our village's master carpenter. We had plenty of people who could hammer a board over a broken window, or patch a hole in a roof, but my father's skill at making and mending was unparalleled. He could

save items that anyone else would have given up for scrap wood, make a cartwheel that would last a lifetime, balance and hang a door so that it would never slam, and carve or inlay ordinary items so cunningly and subtly that even after years of living with them, you would sometimes stop in awe at their loveliness. People whispered – sometimes with gossipy friendliness, at other times more uneasily – that his talent was almost like magic.

"It is still light," he said, just flatly enough to be a reprimand. His hair, worn long and pulled back into a ruthlessly neat topknot, was almost all silvery-white now, though he was still young. For a moment he looked heartbreakingly like my grandmother.

My throat tightened, and when I spoke, my voice was rough. "I … I caught a serow today. Mother would like it cleaned and hung. And … and tonight is—"

"I know what night it is."

My hands clenched into knots as he reached out to pick up a wooden brush, the gesture a clear dismissal.

"I will come when I am finished. Go back to the house now, Hana."

"Yes, Father." I bowed, though he couldn't see me, and turned away without shutting the door. If he intended to keep Mother waiting, he would at least have to get up and shut it to avoid the damp draught blowing on his neck.

I gulped in a rasping breath as I walked back down the path, my eyes dry but burning. The sense of emptiness, of absence, flowed around me again. Like an arrow

piercing my heart, the memory came of another autumn day like this one, when Kyo and I had returned, noisy and triumphant and covered in dirt, to show Father the white hare we had caught. How pride had lit Father's face, how he had gently touched Kyo's wild, tangled hair and laid his hand firmly on my back.

There is a monster in the forest, whispered one of the apple trees as I passed.

A growl vibrated in my chest. "I know!"

I leapt onto the porch, kicked off my sandals with a heavy *thump-thump*, and darted into the steamy warmth of the kitchen without stopping to look at the serow again. It wasn't enough. Nothing was ever enough.

And nothing ever would be.

"There is a creature in the Dark Wood that surrounds the village," loving mothers tell their children as they tuck them into bed at night. "A terrible beast that no man has ever seen and lived to tell of. At the dark of the Moon, when Her light cannot protect us, the monster grows hungry, and calls to the people of the village, and beguiles them from their safe warm beds out into the forest."

"What then?" the half-frightened, half-thrilled children will gasp.

"It eats them," the mothers reply, softly, sadly.

"But … why don't people sleep in shifts? Bar the doors? Tie their feet together?" the children begin to ask as they age, as the story stops being a story and becomes reality:

harsh and close enough to touch. To hurt.

"It doesn't work, my dear ones," the mothers say, still soft but resigned now, firm. "People have tried. Of course they have. For a little while it works. For a little while we think we might be safe. But then the monster grows hungry, too hungry to be denied. The watchers fall asleep. The doors open themselves. The sleepers squirm out of their bonds. They go. And they don't come back. No one ever comes back from the Dark Wood. You must never stray too far into the trees, my dear ones. Never go out at the dark of the Moon. There is a monster in the forest, and it craves human flesh."

We cannot leave this mountain. We cannot even stray far from our valley. The Dark Wood imprisons the village – unbroken as an iron fence, though it shifts and changes like a shadow in the wind – and no one who tries to pass through it ever returns. So we are trapped here, a dwindling, frightened handful, scraping the best living we might from what little land we dare to farm and hunt.

We do not know why.

Why this curse fell upon our mountain, or how the forest, which once was as much a home to my people as their own hearths, became haunted. We do not know where the monster came from or what its true form is. All we know is when it began. One hundred years ago. One hundred years ago the first villager was taken. One

hundred years ago, everything changed.

The curse came with the frost. It was the middle of a bitter winter, and everything that could freeze on the mountain was already frozen. But inside, the screens were drawn, fires were stoked, and people huddled close, warm and safe. Yet that night the cold crept in. When the villagers awoke, their fires had gone out, their clothes and skin were rimed with ice, and icicles hung from the rafters above their beds.

They ventured out of their homes to discover that the familiar forest tracks, the travellers' marks carved into the broad trunks of the trees and the rutted mud road down to Tsuki no Machi – the great City of the Moon – had all disappeared. The wood had changed. Wandering further from the valley, the villagers found new trees. Where there had been bare branches, patches of wintry sunlight and the sight of clear sky, now towering dark evergreens formed a great ring around the village, their dense boughs packed almost solid, like the planks in a fence. Bushes with thorns as long as a man's finger and as black as a tanuki's claw sprouted between the trees and climbed high above their heads. It was a new wood. The Dark Wood.

Something had come into the forest, and made the forest its own.

Most of the village hunters turned back in fear, but one man – braver, bolder than the others, or perhaps simply more foolish – refused to walk away from the dark tangles

of trees that had sprung up overnight. That man was my great-grandfather. It was he, with his family gift of tree-speech, who heard the first warnings of the monster that lurked within the Dark Wood. He passed that warning onto his fellow hunters. He was the greatest tracker and woodsman the village had. He refused to be barred from the place he thought of as his own home – and so, alone, he walked into those trees. Into the deep, Dark Wood. He was never seen again.

The first of our family to be taken, but not the last.

My grandmother was not yet born when it happened. Her mother told her – as all mothers tell their children here – what happened, and she told me and my brother.

Then, when I was ten, the monster took her too.

After that, my brother and I told each other the stories, so that we would not forget. Kyo was two years older than me, and in the dark, lying in our futons next to each other, he whispered the words as our grandmother had, pausing when she had, emphasizing the same parts as she had. It was a way to keep her alive, I think. A way to show that, although she might be gone, disappeared from her futon one morning with nothing to show that she had ever existed but the faint tracks of her feet disappearing into the trees, she had been ours, for a little while.

We thought losing Grandmother was the worst thing that could ever happen to us. But when I was twelve, the monster took Kyo.

Every day, the trees warned, *There is a monster in the forest.*

Every day, I wished – oh, how I wished – that the monster had taken me instead.