

THE QUARRY

The Darkness and the Witch

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At dusk, just when the blisters on Lila's feet were bordering on unbearable, Rivan raised a muscled arm for them to stop. Thinking he was wanting to make camp for the night, Lila let out an audible sigh of relief. She was shushed immediately.

Hidden in the shadows was a creature nothing like anything Lila had ever seen before. She crept up to where Rivan stood, and crouched behind him.

'What is it?' Rivan's whispered question went unanswered, because Lila doubted there was even an answer to give him. It was grotesque.

It was scaled, mostly muddy shades of brown and green with the occasional tinge of a deep blood red, and had jet-black curled horns protruding from its temples. Lila estimated it was the size of a large pig, like the ones on her uncle's farm.

Rivan reached behind him for his bow, which clattered against his quiver as he grasped it.

The beast snarled. It was slightly high pitched, but the way the creature hunched over and clenched its muscles indicated it was likely to attack.

Rivan nocked one of his arrows.

The creature snuffled and turned its face toward the forest floor. It shuffled its stubby legs around for a brief moment, as if trying to gain footing.

Lila leaned forward past Rivan to get a closer look. ‘Wait...’ It was blind. Its eyes were pure black like the plague victims, and it had gnarled slits in its face instead of a nose and seemed to lack any lips to hide its large yellowed fangs.

It screamed. The arrow impaled through its scaled body did nothing to quieten its pain.

‘You absolute idiot,’ Lila growled from low in her throat, over the dying wheezes of the creature. ‘Why the hell did you do that?’

‘What? Are you insane?’ Rivan scoffed. The furrow that appeared between his eyebrows marring his perfectly tanned skin. He looked between her and the monster that lay dead a few metres in front of them. ‘To protect you!’

His sincerity astounded Lila for a beat. She stared at him as he stood dumbfounded, his hand holding the bow extended out by his side. She breathed in through her nose loudly, then let it escape through her parted lips and her eyes fluttered closed.

‘If that was the Witch...’ She didn’t even have to open her eyes to sense the realisation dawn on him, the gasp that came from his direction was telling. ‘I will learn how to use this damn axe just to chop your useless head off!’

‘Harsh... but fair.’ Rivan took another glance at the creature’s body and cringed. ‘I guess we’ll find out soon if I just singlehandedly killed the rest of Easthallow,’ Rivan mumbled to himself, and it did strike a sympathetic chord in Lila. She would have done the same if she had any skill in hunting or combat; it would have been instinctual.

Lila forced herself to crack a small smile in his direction. ‘Hey, let’s set up camp for the night, huh? You could teach me how to chop up firewood?’ She had to forcefully stop herself from putting a comforting hand on his shoulder, far too aware of the curse that crept slowly up her arm.

They left the creature’s body where it lay, both too afraid of the consequences of what had been done, especially if it truly was the Witch.

Her house was darker than she had ever seen it before. Despite years of living there, she had to trail her hand along the wall to track where she was going, she could see

almost nothing. She stumbled through the hallway, tripping over the carpet that lead into her mother's bedroom.

As she entered, it suddenly got light enough for her to see the shape of her mother's body, exactly as it had been for weeks.

She tripped toward the bed, wrists jarring when she had to catch herself from falling face first into her grandmother's sleeping figure. She pulled back the covers.

Wispy darkness had become trapped under her mother's skin and crept through her veins, creating black webs over her entire body that moved like a flowing river. Her skin was mottled black and grey, and her face was tired and sunken. Her eyes were completely black and unseeing.

Her grandmother still spoke to her sometimes, in clipped and strained segments. She was lucid, but Lila could tell the pain was a constant. She would die soon. It was a fact that everyone in the village knew, with dozens of people already dead from the same disease.

This time, she only gasped for air, her chest and ribs visible through translucent skin as they moved with desperate vigour.

'Lila,' a voice rasped next to her. She whipped her head around quickly, her dark auburn hair flicking into her face as she did. Rivan was standing next to her. He nodded his head in her grandmother's direction, and Lila simply shook her head in response. What she meant was obvious.

She felt Rivan slip his hand into hers. What she could feel of his palm was warm and comforting.

Realisation dawned upon her quickly and forcefully like she'd been hit with a sledgehammer. 'Wait, Rivan...' Dread dropped in her chest.

She watched his face crumple in pain. His hand gripped hers what would have been painfully tight if her nerves weren't rotting. He gasped.

'No, no, no, no.' She pulled away from him in a panic, having to forcefully pull out of his hold. 'Please'. Lila instead clutched his shirt.

He faded in front of her eyes. His shoulders fell to a slump and the rest of him quickly followed. It felt like only a second to Lila, but soon Rivan was nothing but a pile of black sludge and dust. Even his bones were gone. Lila's grip on his shirt tightened in vain.

She woke with a loud gasp.

‘Lila?’ Rivan’s voice was groggy with sleep and came from the other side of the fire they’d made, ‘You okay?’

She tried to reply, but it came out as just a soft whimper. Her throat was tense. The stars above them, usually bright against the dark night, were blurred from her tears. She stared upwards with her jaw clenched, begging herself to stop crying, to not make it worse.

Rivan’s blanket rustled. ‘Come here, Lila’. She heard him pat the ground.

‘No, no, I’m okay.’ She cringed. Her voice was thick with tears, and she could tell from Rivan’s silence that he didn’t believe her.

Lila could see his silhouette against the flickering light as he stood up.

She scrambled away from him as he crouched down next to her, with her palm scraping painfully against the ground in her panic. The other was still covered by the glove, but it shook from trying to hold her weight.

‘I’m alright, Rivan...’ She forced a smile that hurt her cheeks, in an attempt to divert his concern, ‘I promise. I’m just really on edge after today, and worried about grandmother. The village will fall into chaos without their elder.’

He nodded solemnly, and moved to drag his pile of blankets around the fire, dirt rising with the smoke. He situated himself alongside her, with their blankets almost touching.

His presence was comforting. Lila fell back asleep to the quiet sounds of his breathing barely audible over the crackling.

They moved quickly the next morning, with a renewed sense of urgency spurring them on.

They reached the rough circle Lila had drawn on the map, the closest estimate to the location of the Witch’s hut she’d been able to make, within a few hours. It took more hours of wandering, circling around countless trees and rocks, to find anything of worth. The area seemed completely uninhabited.

Then the discovery of the hut was made, accompanied by a yell of triumph from Rivan. It stood, nestled around a large grove of pine trees, in complete isolation. There was not even a path leading towards where it stood. Stand it did, but little else.

It was made of grey stone, with one tiny window and a large black iron door and matching chimney. Completely unimpressive and unimposing.

The door was unlocked. Rivan entered first, gesturing to Lila almost immediately to follow.

The hut was lined with tables made of dark wood. They were populated with bottles of coloured liquids, small plants in miscellaneous pots and containers, and a few worm tomes. A deep grey cauldron, worn from use, hung inside the dead hearth. The entirety of the small room smelled stale and earthy.

‘Nothing,’ Rivan sighed. Lila watched him run his fingers over one of the desks, a neat line of dust removed with his touch.

Lila nodded slowly, hoping she seemed calm and that the wrath of shakes that had invaded her body were not noticeable. ‘Why don’t you go and check outside one more time? I’ll see if I can find anything noteworthy in here.’

Rivan raised the corner of his mouth in a sympathetic half smile.

Lila dropped to the floor in defeat. The stone floor immediately scraped up her knees, and she folded herself over completely so her forehead laid on top of them.

One final, desperate attempt: ‘Show yourself, you bitch!’ she screamed into the empty hut. She held her breath for a few seconds, straining to hear any kind of movement or reaction.

The squawk of a bird sounded shockingly close to her ear, which scared into unfolding so her back was straight. Before she could make a sound, a strong arm wrapped around her waist and a hand slinked over her mouth, pressing down firmly.

‘How’s the hand, sweetheart?’ a raspy voice whispered into Lila’s ear.

She was let go and pushed into the floor. Lila flipped around, her already scuffed palm tearing sharply against the rough stones.

She was met with a pointed smirk from the woman that towered over her, sharp canines on display. The Witch’s hair was raven black and her red irises seemed to glow smugly in the sunlight. She leaned closer and grabbed Lila’s gloved hand, the fabric of which had torn with her fall. Even through the fabric the Witch’s hands felt ice cold. Lila couldn’t hold in her pained gasp when the woman ran her thumb over the rip on her palm, the direct contact so cold it burned. The Witch traced a sharp nail over the exposed portion of Lila’s skin, which was swirling black and grey, and was completely numb. She couldn’t feel the slice or the small droplet of black blood that appeared.

‘You poor thing, Lila Weston.’ The Witch’s face was blank as she stared into Lila’s eyes.

Lila shrunk back, feeling uncomfortable under the Witch’s gaze and the knowledge of her identity. ‘My grandmother sent me...’ She started to explain, but the Witch suddenly sent her flying across the hut. Her back smashed against the wall, glass shattering upon a nearby table from the impact.

The Witch’s black heels clicked across the floor as she stalked over. ‘I’m well aware,’ she growled. ‘I know everything, Lila. Your curse, your village... You have her eyes...’ The Witch trailed off, her concentration breaking as her eyes lost focus.

Lila started. ‘You know my grandmother?’ Her grandmother had been the one to send her on this quest, telling her hushed directions to the hut that Lila had heard tales of as a little girl. She had thought it was a fairytale, a story to prevent the children from venturing too far from the village, and yet her grandmother had been adamant.

The Witch scoffed mockingly under her breath, ‘Do I know your grandmother?!’ She raised her voice and leaned forward so she was face to face with Lila, who could feel cold breath on her skin. ‘I loved your grandmother. I know more than you could even imagine, little girl. I’ve been around for centuries. Do you even know my name?’

Lila held her gasp. Against her better judgement, she picked herself up from the ground. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Dianora.’

Lila didn’t recognise the name, but nodded regardless. ‘Dianora, I need your help.’ She paused, thinking over how the conversation had gone thus far and trying her best to appeal to the witch’s weakness, ‘We need your help. We’re dying, my grandmother is dying, and we’ve tried everything to stop it.’

‘And I’m your last resort,’ Dianora sighed. ‘How touching.’

Lila leapt toward Dianora, placing her hands on the witch’s bare arms. ‘Is there anything...’

Lila’s plead was cut off. ‘And how naive. I don’t owe you anything, especially not after your little hunt yesterday.’

The blind beast, Lila thought in a panic. ‘That was an accident.’

‘Hurry up. I don’t often make time for slaughterers; I was very fond of that little creature.’ Dianora shrugged and tilted her head to the side to stare at Lila.

Lila slammed her infected hand against the wall and yelled ‘How can you stand here and do nothing then? Dozens of innocent people are dead and so many more are going to follow!’

‘What makes you think you deserve to live? You are worse than animals; humans are malicious and entitled and weak. I’m through with helping you and getting nothing in return. Get out.’

Lila gasped for breath. The reality of the situation, the hopelessness, was claustrophobic and pushed against her unrelentingly. The thought that her entire village was just sentenced to death, made her skin crawl. She glanced down at the worst of the prickling, her left calf. Circling around her leg was a black and silver snake. Its scales shifted against Lila’s olive skin.

It took her a moment to process. She looked up to Dianora, who was smiling maliciously at her.

‘You’re insane!’ Lila screamed, using her numb hand to pull the snake off, just in case it attacked her.

As she charged out the door, Lila heard Dianora mutter behind her, ‘Go on and cry about it.’

‘Lila!’ Rivan must have heard her yelling, or the way she clamoured loudly out of the hut. He sprinted over, eyes wide and scanning her quickly for any kind of injuries. ‘Are you alright?’

The world is ending, Lila thought. She pulled him in, grabbing his face with both hands, and she could feel the warmth of his cheek on her palm. Their lips met desperately and his hands grasped at her waist. The touch was electric and deadly.

Lila had just signed away his life, but all she could do was grip him tighter and hope that humans had more time than they thought.