

THE QUARRY

A Devil's Favour

Matthew Byrnes

You seem like the kind of human that likes stories. You're willing to come into my domain, to sit attentively and try and gain just a little bit more knowledge about things you can't understand. You know, I remember not so long ago, demons were things people wanted to stay away from. But here you are, with perked ears and pressing questions, wanting to leave with just a few secrets of the world. Small details like that reveal a lot about a person. You remind me of somebody I knew once, many years ago. If you'd like, I'll tell you a story. But I warn you, you might not enjoy how it ends.

It's interesting watching humans react, when the thing they value most is taken away. Every human I've ever met has seemed so above the earthly struggles of other creatures. What happens when they start to fall, when the fragile supports for their lives start to stray? They scramble and fight towards any kind of relief, no matter the cost. In that moment of desperation, they're just like any other starving animal.

Lauren was one of those humans who I took particular interest in watching. In her youth, I watched her bounding and playing in the fields, only returning home after a full day under the sky. I don't know what it was that set her apart from the sheep that she lived with, but she seemed wilder, more in tune with the natural world. Her father was a skilful hunter, and as she grew into a young adult, he trained her until her skills rivalled his own. Teaching her to have a respect for the wild, and the ancient forces that dwelled in the natural world, Lauren grew to be a respected and noble hunter. With her light hair and wild features, and the speed with which she glided through the overgrowth of the woods, the villagers compared her more to a wolf than a young maiden.

The more I watched, the more fascinated I was with the pure desire she held, not just to run and explore everything the world had to offer, but to be the fastest, most efficient hunter in the village. She would venture where nobody else would dare, and take on any quarry that came her way. This determination was intriguing to me.

On a particularly close hunt, I watched her chase a white rabbit along the stony riverbed. She had crept down the rocky slopes, trying to follow the small animal's bounds, but the rocks were slick with river water. It was so easy for me to shift her position ever so slightly from the shadows. The second Lauren was close enough to spring towards the rabbit, her footholds betrayed her, her ankle standing fast as her body plummeted. Her knee twisted, trying vainly to stay straight as her bones gave way with a delicious crack.

Oh, the doctors had plenty to say when they found her. As they carried her into bed and tried desperately to set her crushed bones into place, they assured her, even as she screamed, that a broken leg was far from the worst thing that could have happened. But when they finally finished their work, and Lauren's ruined leg was hidden beneath a wrapping of bandage, it was obvious for anybody watching that the spark that had once driven her forwards was all but extinguished. She would never walk again; the doctors were very clear in saying. The bones, muscles and ligaments were ruptured and splintered in a way that shouldn't have been possible for such an injury. Now her leg lay immobilized, twisted and misshapen like a tree branch growing oddly in a cramped space.

I visited her many times from her bedside. She had taken to watching the predators of the night from the confines of her room. She saw an owl, with its broad feathers and knowing eyes, gliding towards its nightly meal. A wolf howled faintly from the crags of the mountain, its voice barely reaching her ears from many miles away. But I was her favourite thing to

watch. I wore the skin of a wild, black cat, with sleek features and agile limbs, as I chased the beady-eyed mice that crept from her cottage at night.

The first time I met her, I enjoyed playing a game with my prey. It was effortless to ensnare the mice I chased; yet I chose to leave the smallest of gaps in the cage my claws became, allowing the tiniest of glimpses of freedom, but never enough to escape before being ensnared again. From the first time she saw me, I knew she was enthralled, not by my skin, but with how I stalked my prey. In her eyes I saw the grief of her situation mingled with the envy for my grace. I wore the skin of a hunter, a skin she had once worn and now mourned.

When I first spoke with her, she was terrified. Humans are supposedly the only creatures in your world that can speak, and hearing my voice ignited all manner of superstitions in Lauren. She pushed me away as I prowled down the side of her bed. She cursed me and fought me when I began to ask her questions. But as the night wore on, I sensed a shred of curiosity beneath her façade. She wanted to know why I was there, and what I was doing talking to her. Any doubts that lingered in her mind were quickly swept away when I asked her one simple question.

‘Lauren, if you could make one desire of yours a reality, if you could request something of the gods, something that would elevate your life above what it is now, what would you want?’

Lauren took a long pause before finally responding. ‘I want to run, to fly, to hunt again. I’ve never felt more useless trapped in this bed, and I want nothing more than to chase and move freely, like you do.’

It became clear quite quickly the kind of person she really was, you see. Every problem in Lauren’s life had a simple solution. There was no river she couldn’t find a path around, no jungle she couldn’t push her way through. And even now, with her body failing her, Lauren refused to accept that there wasn’t another path to get what she needed. She knew what I was; she knew that the omen of a dark creature whispering promises in the night brought misfortune and sorrow. But life was a game to Lauren. A game that she had always won. I could tell that deep inside of her heart. She wasn’t ready to start losing. And so, I offered her a path towards what she craved. I would give her power, the ability to run and hunt again, the ability to stand as being more than a simple human. I would make her a predator.

I can tell you've heard stories like this before. I hope you aren't too angry with me. Maybe you fear for Lauren's safety, having dealings with a creature like me. Maybe you might even call me cruel, for taking such a beautiful, natural thing and twisting it for my own needs.

Night after night I returned to her side, gradually showing her more of the power I had at my disposal. I changed my shape into exotic animals that she had never seen. I enticed her with stories of far-away lands and hidden ancient truths of the very earth. Every night she turned me away, calling me demon, and monster. And every night, I watched from the shadows as she stared yearningly out the window for longer and longer, as I slowly convinced her. Her expression would soften each night, as she started to laugh at my jokes, and listen intently to the many promises I made. Eventually, she did accept my offer. Rest assured, I gave her everything she asked for.

Magic is something you humans consider other-worldly. But in truth magic comes from the very earth itself. It might well be the most natural thing still thriving in this place you choose to live in. I used a small portion of it to repair Lauren's leg, and another to build her a home, in the secluded wilds of the woods. A house brimming with the magic of the ancient wild. Magic that she now wielded.

The first few years passed in happiness for Lauren. The house was large and ever changing, the paintings and furniture living companions for her. The library was full of books, that sang and laughed and cheerfully told her any stories she desired. Fanciful creatures filled the halls, animals of every land, happy to chase her and be chased through the house.

Over time, Lauren found that the house, and its many denizens, existed to serve her will. At a whim, the paintings would shift and move to her desires, showing her any image she yearned for. Her favourites were images of snow-capped mountains, of forests and undiscovered country, entire lands that she would have loved to run through. The books in her library told her stories of foreign land: some covered in more ice than stone, whose great peaks were too treacherous for even the most daring of explorers, of great red deserts full of creatures that were dangerous enough to kill any who hunted them.

But as the years passed her by, Lauren learned that magic was a resource like any other. And as the years slowly drained her reserves of magic, she found that the furniture and the walls of the house began to decay. The paintings, once full of vibrant colour, began to ooze

and drip from the frames and seep into a colourless mass on the floor. The books began to screech harshly as their pages blackened and curled up into nothingness.

Lauren herself, whose very body was fuelled by this ancient stream of magic, got the worst of it. She found herself decomposing with the house, her own flesh rotting and writhing, her healed leg beginning to creak and break and twist into something horrific and unnameable.

When she begged me to fix it, I told her simply that I couldn't. This was her domain. She now needed to provide for it. Lure an innocent soul into the house and slay them. Whatever magic is inside of their soul will go to the house, and their blood will restore your power.

Even as her body decayed, she vowed to never sully her hands with human blood. But as she withered and her mind started to crack under the ravages of time, the promise of relief became unbearable.

What more could poor Lauren do, but finally hunt. An old man had wandered into the woods, crossbow in hand, straying just too close to the house. At my urging, she decided to finally break her vow.

She opened the door, shifting the weight off of her ruined leg as she peered outside. Her eyes were withered and unfocussed. Her frail body trembled as she supported her weight on the doorframe. She held out her hand, attempting to use her magic to attack the man, and small sparks danced at the edges of her fingertips. However, the second her hand crossed the threshold of the house, the sparks faded away, draining Lauren of her strength and leaving her withered form dizzy and faint.

The man noticed her attempt, and paused in his tracks. Lauren's eyes were failing her, but she saw clearly as his face contorted in fury. He charged towards her door with a familiar determination, brandishing his weapon as he yelled all manner of curses. As Lauren hobbled further into the house, he followed her with all of the persistence of a hunter, deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of decay and ruin. He finally caught up to her, his murderous intent coming to a head, as he brandished his weapon. At that moment, Lauren felt utterly powerless and weak, her body too frail to take any action. And in that desperation, as her heart wished earnestly to live on just a little bit further, she invoked my name, and my power brimmed at her fingertips.

The splintered wooden beams of the walls in the house turned into arrows, their wooden shafts flying from all corners as they pierced the man's body. His broken frame fell lifelessly to the ground. As his lifeblood sank into the rotten floorboards, the house, and the witch that lived inside of it, began to heal and recover.

Lauren, now young and vibrant again, strode forward towards the dead man. She was shocked as, now with clear eyes, she saw the corpse of her father, withered by the years, but still wearing the stern, determined expression he'd always had.

She begged me to restore him to life, and to let her die instead. Indeed, there is nothing nature more reviles than a child slaying its parent. But I had already claimed my prize, and this was a reward I could not return. I feasted that night, and even as her skin became smooth once more, Lauren finally understood the role she had inherited for the rest of her days. She thought she was the cat, prowling gracefully as she hunted. But as the years passed and she learned how to lure her prey into her thrall, Lauren finally recognised her place. She was the mouse, enjoying the brief seconds of freedom between my claws, before I snared her once again.

In the years to come, Lauren became resigned to her fate. Powerless to flee the house, never gaining the courage to allow herself to die, her relationship with humanity became far more estranged than she was used to. Mortality became a fleeting thought, something to exploit from others, rather than to be applied to herself. She learned how to use the magic I gave her to better play her role.

With her magic she took the skin of a hawk. She left her human form behind, soaring above the trees as her keen avian eyes scanned the ground for prey. She relished the wind rushing over her feathers, how agile and swift her movements could be. As she approached the den of her prey, she shifted into a wolf, with strong legs and powerful jaws, with a pelt of soft grey. She crept through the overgrowth of the woods, slinking and stalking towards her victims. She approached the lonely and the wistful as a pale lady of the woods, drawing them away from their homes with her beautiful, bewitching visage. They followed her blindly through the dense woods, venturing deeper and deeper, until they found a lovely wooden house. It was charming and beautiful to look at. But when one ventured inside of their own accord it became a deadly trap. A web that ensnared and consumed its victims.

You might think I'm a monster, and to some degree I'm sure you're right. But no matter the fate of Lauren, she at least understood how things really were. Humans are just as

bad as any demon I know. You destroy, corrupt, and shirk responsibility, all to ensure your precious little, limited lives continue. What I have done that is any different? For all of the ways that Lauren has fallen astray, I maintain that every promise I made her came true. She lives as something more than human. More than animal. That's the truth of life, the secret that you came here to find. Flesh is flesh, and all animals have it, even humans. It's only you humans that consider yourselves above the struggles of the earth. Are you really content to live like that?

I like you. I think, below the programmed responses that every person instinctively holds about their stake on the world, you see a glimmer of truth in what I say. As open as Lauren has become, I think she has outlived her usefulness.

Lauren shows a coldness to her now that I never saw in her before. She kills as a matter of fun now, rather than just to survive. I think somewhere along the line, she figured out that I can't directly influence the world itself. All power has limits I suppose. And even though the thought of a mortal challenging me is amusing, if she gathers enough power, she believes that she will no longer have a use for me.

Tell me, what can I offer you? Perhaps there's something missing from your life that I can give, if you take Lauren's place. Every human I've met has disappointed me, but maybe you're different. I sense a spark inside of you, a desire to explore what exists beyond the shackles of humanity. I promise, you'll be different to Lauren. You'll have power that the creatures of this world could only dream of. So, what do you say?