

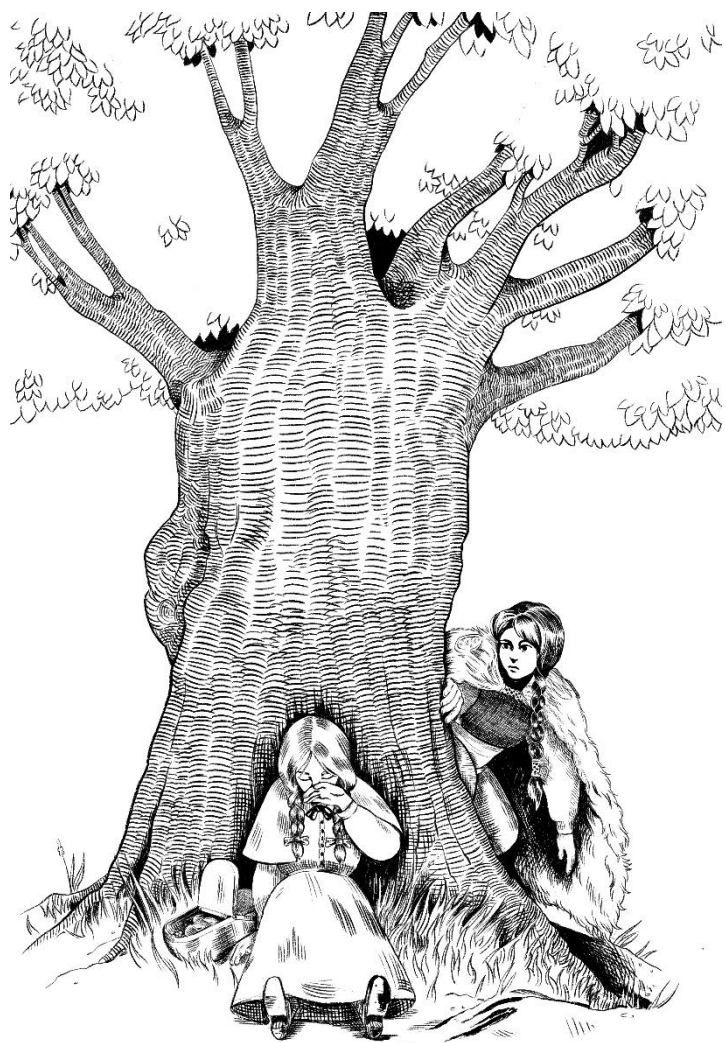
# The Forest Girl

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## I.

Once upon a time, there lived a girl in a distant forest. She had grown up isolated in an old log cabin built by her father many years prior. The only other person she would ever see was a golden haired delivery girl from the nearby village who would bring her bread once a week.

“Your bread,” the delivery girl would say as she presented a fresh loaf to the forest girl. “Thank you,” the forest girl would reply with a nod before shutting the door. While the interaction seemed cold at first, the delivery girl had come to learn that it was simply the forest girl’s way.

One morning, the delivery girl did not arrive at the cabin at the usual appointed

time. The forest girl became concerned, for she had never been late before.

*Perhaps she was held up by some unforeseen circumstance on her way here,* the forest girl thought. The morning passed into afternoon, but the delivery girl still had not come. Finally, when the sun had drifted a few hours beyond its peak, the forest girl pushed away from her table declaring, “There must be something wrong! I will go investigate.” Grabbing her fur cloak and hatchet from their hook beside the door, she set out towards the town in search of the delivery girl.



A couple miles down the road, the forest girl spotted a faint set of footprints that trailed off the dirt path. She followed them into the tall brush and down the bank to a small stream that ran through the forest. Walking upstream, she eventually caught sight of a small muddy boot sticking

out from behind a large tree root. The forest girl paused and heard sniffing over the water's soft burbling. If the owner of the boot, who she hoped to be the delivery girl, was attempting to hide, she was doing an awfully poor job of it.

The forest girl approached the tree with exaggerated steps, making sure to squelch loudly in the mud and rustle the half-drowned shrubs around her, so as to not startle the upset girl. The boot disappeared behind the tree root and was replaced with a pale face outlined by two golden braids. Watery blue eyes peered at the approaching figure.

"Hello," the forest girl called gently. The delivery girl wiped a sleeve across her face. "I suppose you're wondering where your bread is," she answered, trying to muster a smile but only managing to look more despondent.

The forest girl came around the tree and crouched in front of the delivery girl. "I

was concerned. I thought something had happened to you.”

“Something has happened!” the delivery girl cried. She ran a sleeve across her face again to wipe her dripping nose. “My father would have me married.”

Confused, the forest girl replied,

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad.”

“But it is! I do not wish to marry the man my father has chosen. He is mean and old and I do not wish to live with him!”

“So you ran away?”

“I didn’t know what else to do, or where to go. The forest offers a good hiding place, at least for a few days.”

The forest girl bit her lip. It had taken her hardly any time to find the delivery girl—she wouldn’t last a single night without help. She paused for a moment before clasping the delivery girl’s hands in her own and looking steadily at her. “You

can come and live with me. I've lived alone most of my life, but I think some company would be nice."

"But my father knows you are here. He is the one who would have me bring you the bread every week, as he promised your father he would years ago. If he finds us, he would surely punish you for helping me."

"Then we could move deeper into the forest. I can build another cabin."

The delivery girl sniffed and shook her head, staring at her hands resting in the forest girl's. "I could not make you do that."

"It would be alright."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The forest girl stood up, pulling the other girl to her feet. The forest girl grinned. "We should get going before—"

The forest girl's words were cut short with a loud *thunk*. Hot blood splattered across the delivery girl's face and her eyes widened in horror as more blood erupted from around an arrow protruding from the forest girl's eye. The delivery girl stumbled backwards and fell against the tree as the forest girl, still for a moment with her smile still frozen grotesquely on her face, landed on the forest floor with a sickening thud.

Heavy footsteps approached from where the arrow had been let loose. In a moment, a large figure loomed over the delivery girl, who had not taken her eyes off the forest girl's body. "You thought you could run away from the obligation you owe your father, you ungrateful swine?" the man growled.

The girl shook her head so the loose strands of her braid stuck to her sweat-dampened face. She was still staring towards the fallen forest girl, but her eyes were far away. Even so, the man interpreted this as a

reply to his words. "Oh, yes--one word from me and he'll be known as a liar and a cheat because of you, so don't try my patience any longer."

The man clasped the delivery girl's arm and began dragging her away. As she struggled, the delivery girl caught the gleam of the forest girl's hatchet and lunged forward to yank it free of its belt. She swung the hatchet around with all her might in hopes of injuring her attacker and escaping, but the man caught her arm mid-swing with little effort. His previously amused expression was now hard and cold, his eyes blazing. He wrenched the hatchet from the girl's hand and without hesitation brought the blade down on her thigh. A scream tore from the girl's throat followed by a defeated whimper as the man pulled the blade free. She heard him muttering curses at her as she lost consciousness.

The man let the girl fall to the ground before he stooped down to bandage her leg.

After he had ensured the wound was tightly bound, he threw her limp body over his shoulder and set off toward the village.

The forest girl's corpse remained forgotten on the forest floor, her warm blood still soaking into the damp earth.

The delivery girl was married the next day.

## II.

Summer passed quietly into Autumn, and the last of the year's leaves fluttered to the ground in the crisp air. A large figure swept over the undergrowth, crunching the dead leaves under his large boots as the squirrels chattered wildly around him. Suddenly, the air was split by a high-pitched snarl followed by a violent rustling of leaves. The man's brow furrowed as he pinpointed the direction the sound was coming from. Pressing forward, he crested a small slope and found two foxes, backs bristled and lips drawn back, wrestling over a large bone gripped between their teeth. Snarls and screeches continued to pierce the air as they attempted to wrench it away from one another, all the while unaware of the man's approach.

The man, now only inches from them, rustled the fallen leaves around him loudly,

to alert them of his presence. The foxes quieted and looked up in surprise at the large figure draped in his thick fur cloak and poised above them. Immediately, they dropped the bone and bolted into the trees with a yelp. The man waited until they were out of sight before investigating the prize they had been fighting over. He did not bend to touch it, for it was obvious even from a distance that the bone was human.

The man looked around and found a trail of tossed leaves and grass the foxes had created in their scuffle. Following it, he reached a small stream's bank and followed the flow of its current. As the man continued forward, the forest grew eerily quiet, save for the continued crunching of leaves under foot and the quiet babbling of the water. Even as the man rounded a large white oak and stopped, the stream continued on like an oblivious child in the face of tragedy.

Time had rotted and withered any flesh from what was once the forest girl's

body but fragments of her matted fur cloak and insect-eaten clothes remained. Leaves scraped against the uncovered parts of the remaining bones as the gentle breeze nudged them across the forest floor. The man noted that some of the bones were missing—the two foxes were not the first to have had their pick. Strangely, the only part of her not ravaged by creatures' teeth marks was the skull and the arrow that protruded from what used to be her right eye.

The man knelt beside the remains and was still for several more minutes. At one point he raised his hand—perhaps to remove the arrow, but dropped it and continued to gaze upon the corpse in silence. He shed no tears, and no sound from him disturbed the forest. He just worked his jaw occasionally with the faraway look in his eyes betraying pensiveness rather than shock or sorrow.

After a long moment, the man stood and unlatched the bag that was slung around his broad shoulders. From it he took a parcel wrapped in brown paper. In the paper was a thin but soft blanket spun from fine rabbit wool; it had been gifted to him while he was away, and he had intended to give it to his daughter. He laid the blanket down beside the remains and carefully transferred the larger fragments of the skeleton onto the

center. Once he collected what he saw fit, he bunched the blanket, tied the ends with some leather cord from



his bag, and fastened the bundle around his waist. The man smoothed his thick cloak over the bundle so its shape was hidden under the bulk of the pelt. He turned and returned to the main road, only lifting his eyes once the remains were behind him.



### III.

The nearby village had nearly doubled in size since the man had last been there. In addition to houses, now white daubed structures rather than the thatch that used to be the main building material, there were many more businesses along the main street: a clothier with many pre-made garments and hats, a bakery with sweets and fresh bread in its windows, a tavern that served meals as well as alcohol, and even a small bookshop. As the man passed the bookshop, a couple came out of the doorway arm in arm with the man holding a paper-wrapped book to his chest. The woman was laughing elegantly at something he had said, tilting her head back so her jewel-studded hair comb winked superiorly in the weak afternoon light.

Down the street, a woman was scolding her whining daughter, tugging hard

on her small hand.

“Don’t get your new dress dirty: you’ll embarrass me,” she chided as she



glanced anxiously at the hem of the squirming girl’s purple satin skirt.

The man’s attention was snapped away as a tall, scrawny girl carrying a small basket whisked in front of him. The girl sneered over her shoulder, not even bothering to stop. The man, blank-faced and unperturbed, watched her approach two boys loitering in an alleyway. The girl reached into her basket and pulled out a fat loaf of bread that she triumphantly waved over her head. The boys straightened up with sly grins on their narrow faces, and the girl ripped the bread into thirds.

As the man got away from the main street toward the more residential area, the houses became larger. The smaller homes,

though still large in comparison to many neighboring villages, had simple hand-painted patterns on shined copper or darkly stained wood, while the larger houses boasted heavy looking front doors set with plates of fine gemstones or marble. These things were odd against the forested backdrop that surrounded the village.

The man approached the largest house in the village, its door set with white quartz panels. Carved on each piece was a quarter of a ship so that all four completed the pattern. Gold ran through the carved lines and made the whole spectacle more visible to anyone passing on the street.

Indifferent to the home's grandeur, the man approached the door and rapped on it tersely with his gloved fist.

Immediately, he heard a gruff, muffled voice from the other side of the door. "Rosalie! We have a guest! Hurry up, girl!" A soft reply could barely be heard, and a moment later the door opened a sliver, revealing a girl. Her eyes were blank

and blue, and her complexion pale and sickly. Two dull yellow braids were draped over her shoulders, suggesting that she was younger than her tired eyes made her appear.

“Yes, sir?” the girl mumbled while staring at the ground.

“I wish to speak with your father,” the man stated.

The girl glanced up and met his eyes for only a moment before turning over her shoulder to weakly shout, “Father!” There was a grunt followed by the sound of feet thudding against the floor. Labored breaths punctuated each step as the girl’s father came lumbering around the corner into the entryway. He was a large man, balding at the top with his sides slicked back with oil. His clothes were fine but rumpled from lack of care. “Who is it?” he grumbled. The merchant stopped short when he saw the visitor’s imposing stature but just as quickly

regained his composure and stood up tall and straight. “My office will be open Monday, if you have some sort of business—”

“My daughter,” the man said, his voice low and even.

The merchant was silent for a long moment while his eyes narrowed

“Daughter? Should I know who....”

The wealthy man seemed to suddenly remember that his own daughter was still standing between himself and his guest. With an annoyed grumble he grabbed her arm and yanked her aside. The girl stumbled backwards and nearly fell as her leg gave way beneath her. She struck out her hand desperately and caught the door frame before she completely lost her balance. As she regained her footing, her free hand wandered to her swollen stomach. Her pregnancy was probably a little less than six months along, but her alarming gauntness made it seem much farther developed. The man in the

doorway did not take his eyes from the merchant, but he took note of all this with a darkening expression.

“Should I know who your daughter is?”

“The girl who lived in the forest. The one I paid you every month to have bread delivered to her.”

The forest man saw the pregnant girl's eyes widen. Her fingers trembled where they still gripped the door frame. The girl's father did not seem to notice as his own face cleared with understanding. He batted his hand as if waving away an imaginary cloud from in front of his face. “Ah! Yes, yes, I remember now—the girl. Well, I assume she is still in the forest, though exactly where she lives, I couldn't say, for I've never been out that way myself. As a matter of fact, I sometimes wondered if she existed at all!” The man chuckled. “But I guarantee that a loaf of bread has been delivered faithfully every week, as we agreed upon all

those years ago. I stake my honor on it, sir. If an update is what you are here for, on Monday we can speak at my office just down the street and—”

“What happened to your daughter’s leg?”

The merchant glanced at his daughter, who was halfway hiding behind the door frame. “Oh, that?” he answered with a sneer. “She had an accident a few months back. Was her own fault -- she had decided to run away and get lost in the woods -- but I was gracious enough to forgive her error in judgement. She’s perfectly fine--” While the merchant babbled on, the forest man’s gaze rested on the girl. Her eyes, downcast again but wide and unfocused, suggested that she was anything but “perfectly fine.” Before the girl’s father could attempt to once again dismiss his visitor, a large figure stalked toward the entryway from inside the house. His dark eyes darted from the stranger to the merchant and finally rested

on the girl. She shrank and pressed further into the wall. "What's all this?" the man asked.

"Oh, Matthias," the merchant replied, though Matthias had directed his question at the girl with the braids. "Just a business matter, nothing to trouble yourself with. We'll be—"

"What happened to the girl's leg?" the forest man repeated. The merchant's polite expression cracked to reveal his growing annoyance. He opened his mouth about to reply.

"I am asking him this time," the forest man stated before the merchant could say anything more Matthias tilted his chin up and crossed his arms. "A simple disagreement between my wife and I—not that it's any of your business."

The forest man looked from Matthias to the merchant, who was nodding soberly at his son-in-law's words. The man's eyes returned to the girl who kept her gaze down

and her shoulders tensed. “Do you know of your father-in-law’s business with the forest: having bread delivered to a girl every week?” Matthias’s brow furrowed at the strange question, but he answered. “I am aware that he sends perfectly good bread into the woods for a girl he has never met, and for a meager monthly offering promised to him years ago.”

The money would seem meager to someone living in such a home, and in a town that has tripled in size since the deal was struck, but the forest man imagined that much of their current wealth was built from his very payments.

“But some strange girl and how my wife’s father wastes a few pennies is of no consequence to me.” Matthias continued.

The merchant cleared his throat. “Matthias, son, there is no need for such harsh words. The girl you speak of is this man’s daughter, and the fee for my service

is hardly meager, I assure you. Besides, I am a man who honors *all* of his deals. This is how I have become so successful—I've built this town up from a hovel! All of its prosperity is because of my business savvy and generosity. Well," the merchant corrected with a chuckle, "and *your* generosity, of course. The timeline of my success was pushed along greatly by our deal."

"Generosity," the forest man repeated. "Yes, I understand just how *generous* you've been." The man's tone startled the girl into glancing up. The merchant's smile slipped a bit as he took in the forest man's stormy expression.

"You claim to have brought success, but to you that means only your own wealth. There is no kindness or empathy in your actions, let alone in this village. If there was, this girl would not be standing before me, trembling, or married to *him*." The forest man pointed at the girl's husband with his chin.

“Now see here—” the merchant began while Matthias uncrossed his arms and stepped forward with tightly fisted hands. “I’ve seen this village you’ve made,” the forest man continued. “It is a place of greed and malice justified by selfishness. The forest girl was expired several months ago by this man.” The forest man pointed at Matthias without breaking gaze with the merchant. “I am sure the new bread deliverer would have informed you of this if she had not been keeping the bread for herself. But it seems that as long as I have continued to pay you, you’d rather turn a blind eye to the innocent blood spilled in my forest.”

The merchant’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “You can’t have known of it -- you were— gawd knows where! And I -- I’m a busy man! I can’t go wandering around the woods to make sure someone else’s daughter is cared for. I have my own daughter, you know!”

“And a fine job you’ve done, raising a girl that stands before me limping and terrified by the mere presence of the husband you chose for her. Her face, and the faces of the people in this greed stricken town you have built, have told me everything that I need to know.”

The forest man turned and walked away from the dumbfounded merchant. Matthias, his face flushed with rage, pushed his wife aside to get through the door. “How dare you come here and speak to me like this! You know nothing!”

“Matthias, please,” the merchant called after him as he, too, stepped outside and followed. The girl watched them from the doorway, her eyes growing increasingly worried.

The forest man stopped in the center of the street, what used to be the center of the once small village, and closed his eyes. He did not seem to hear Matthias’s shouts or

the wealthy man hobbling after him telling him not to make a scene, which only drew more judgmental attention from the people passing them.

The forest man tensed his shoulders and inhaled deeply. As he did so, the makeshift bag made from his blanket at his waist burst into a golden flame and evaporated into a light that surrounded the man in a golden aura. As he lifted his arms and held them at shoulder height the winds picked up and continued to grow more and more violent. The gale tore shingles from roofs, ripped signs off their posts with metallic shrieks, wrenched whole walls from their foundations, and ground it all to pieces. The merchant, his son-in-law, their neighbors in their finery and opulent homes, swirled around in the dome of the forest man's powerful winds. All the while his eyes blazed bright gold and his hair whipped wildly about. Within a matter of moments nothing remained on the ground,

but all was being tossed and torn apart in the air above him.

Even after the man lowered his arms, the winds raged on. He walked through the storm back to where the merchant's house had stood not long before. There he saw the young pregnant girl curled on the ground cowering in fear. Her arms were drawn over her head but not a hair upon it was touched by the roaring winds that continued to destroy the rest of the village. The forest man approached her with slow, even steps, wisps of his fiery aura trailing behind him. He knelt down and gently touched her shoulder, making her flinch in surprise before looking up into his warm, clear gaze, now void of the fiery blaze that had existed only moments ago. The man held out his hand with a kind face that made the girl think of the forest girl...who had looked at her in the same way right before she was killed. The girl stared at the forest man for a moment before she took his hand. He helped

her up and gave her a moment to find her balance before turning and walking back towards the forest. Without hesitation, the girl followed closely behind, the village she had grown up in all but forgotten.

As the forest man and the girl disappeared into the line of trees, the winds ceased and the dust rested on the now-empty clearing. No trace of the village or anyone who was ever of there remained.

