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## For Babcia and Dziadek because trees cannot grow without roots





# THE GIRL WHO ENTERED THE WOOD

THE FESTIVITIES OF KUPAŁA NIGHT are just beginning when Liska Radost leaves the village behind.

Her eyes prick with tears as she takes a final look over her shoulder. A gust of wind snags at her shawl, threatening to devour the flame of her lantern. This night, the solstice, should belong to revelry beneath a broad summer moon. It is the night unmarried girls weave crowns of wildflowers and float them down the river for the local boys to chase, the night that folk songs are sung to the roar of a joyful bonfire, the night when villagers pray to God for fertile fields and livestock and wives. But most importantly, it is the night that, according to legend, the fern flower will bloom.

And if the legends are true, this is the night that Liska will find it. She will take it into her hands and make her wish, and she will atone for her sins.

She treads deeper into the dark, through one of the many wheat fields that crawl along the rolling hills and wreathe the village from all sides. In midday, the sun will turn their stalks to spun gold, but now they are a foreboding rustle against Liska's floral-patterned skirts, bowing like penitents in contrition. She raises her lantern higher, but its light is no more than a sputtering spark—a mockery of the Kupała bonfire that dances far in the distance, etching the thatched rooftops of Stodoła into the night's canvas.

Stodoła. Home. A home she will not see again if she does not succeed tonight. She knows what rumors the villagers whisper: that she is a witch, that she is as wicked as the

dark magic harbored in the spirit-wood. She almost smiles at the irony: that accursed place, called the Driada, is where the fern flower is said to bloom.

It is her only chance at redemption.

Overhead, the moon rises, a great silver eye opened wide and watchful. It spurs Liska onward, stokes the flame of urgency in her chest. In all the stories, the fern flower only blooms until sunrise—there is not a moment to waste.

Her path takes her past the farmlands, to rolling hills dotted with phantom-white birch trees and coarse grass housing an orchestra of crickets. In an attempt to bolster her spirits, she starts to hum, a folk song about a girl and two suitors and a rowan tree. The crickets set a rhythm, the breeze whispers in harmony, and slowly she convinces herself she is not afraid.

Until the spirit-wood comes into view.

She has seen the Driada before—every child of Stodoła has, brought here by the mischievous curiosity only a child possesses. How often did she stand in this spot with Marysieńka, the two daring each other to creep ever closer to the wood? Closer and closer and closer, until a growl or a rustle from within would send them shrieking, running all the way home. Children do foolish things until they are old enough to understand they are foolish—until their father teaches them to weave the straw hangings found in every Stodoła home, or their mother explains why she ties their hair with crimson ribbons. *It is protection*, she will say, gentle yet somber, *from spirits and demons and the evils of the spirit-wood*.

Standing so close, Liska must admit that the forest has a morbid sort of beauty: the beauty of flowers over tombs or the dive of a hawk catching prey. Its trees are enormous, thick as towers and sprawling, with branches like an old woman's fingers tangled in cotton-thick mist. It smells, Liska realizes, like a freshly dug grave—loam and rot and carrion, staining every breath.

Somewhere in there is the fern flower. When she finds it, she must make her wish carefully, for it only grants one. In the legends, men often make poorly worded wishes and meet terrible ends, assuming they make it past the wood's devilish spirits. Here at least, Liska's curse gives her an advantage—she has always been able to sense spirits, hear them, even see them: the skrzat by the stove complaining of the dirty floor or the kikimora in the neighbor's house exclaiming in delight as she finds yarn to tangle. But

those are benevolent house spirits grown fat on offerings of bread and salt, friendly to the humans who shelter them. She doubts the Driada's demons will speak the same tongue.

Is she really going to do this? It's not too late to turn back.

She does not belong here.

A memory: Father Paweł sits in the kitchen of the cramped Radost cottage. He is a young priest, his fraying cassock as patchy as his beard, and his expression is too wary to pass for sympathy. He and Mama are the only people in Stodoła who know of Liska's secret. At least, they were, until two evenings ago.

"The people are beginning to wonder, Dobrawa," Paweł says. "There is no proof, but no one can explain it elsewise. The best thing you can do is to send her away, before she loses control again or the Prawotas rally enough people to their cause."

Liska is not meant to hear his words, but she listens anyway, watching from outside the hut through a crack in the shutters. Her teeth are firmly clamped to her lip, and she tastes iron on her tongue. The day is humid, the sky a cloud-crowded blue, and a chicken is pawing at the dirt by her feet.

"I know, Father, I know, but where would she go?"

Dobrawa Radost—*Mama*—sits across from Father Paweł, picking mint leaves off a stem and laying them out for drying. With her rigid bearing and hoarfrost-cold eyes, she has always reminded Liska of Szklana Góra, the glass mountain from the stories that no knight could conquer. And like that mountain, she is neither kind nor cruel. She is simply indomitable, a trait required of her as Stodoła's folk healer.

"She is of age," Father Paweł replies. "And a well-behaved, proper girl. You could have her married off, apprenticed... or better yet, sent to a convent. God does not turn anyone away, and His presence will keep her from being tempted by those unholy powers."

Dobrawa sighs. "I have considered all those things, Father, but is it truly a good idea to send her off alone? I fear what she may become without guidance." She throws down a naked mint stem. "Ah, Bogdan would have known what to do with her. He was the only one who truly knew."

"You are doing the right thing," Father Paweł assures her. "It is not a condemnation, only a precaution. For her own safety, and..."

And for ours. Those last words went unspoken, but Liska knows what the priest wanted to say: that Liska is dangerous, that she has been corrupted by magic, like an

orchard by blight.

"I will change that," she promises the stars above. "I will make it right."

She will do anything to prove that she is not dangerous, that she belongs—to the village and her people. Even if it means putting her faith in childhood fairy tales.

She steps forward, farther, closer, until she is looking up at the Driada's trees. Dread clutches her throat, but she swallows it back.

"God preserve me," she whispers.

Within the wood, something shrieks in response. The wind? No, it is too uneven.

A howl.

Or perhaps laughter.

Holding up her lantern, Liska Radost stares down the path she has chosen, no more than trampled underbrush between whispering nettles and cruel briars parted like jaws. In the flickering firelight, it all seems a mirage, the threshold to a palace of darkness. Waiting. Watching.

The laughter sounds once more, and this time she forces herself to smile back.

Then she steps between the trees.



Nothing is a certainty in the night in the wood.

In a windless dark shuttered from the world, a tree is not a tree but a disfigured body with crooked limbs; its bark not bark but a grotesque face with cracking skin; the brambles beneath not brambles at all, but wicked talons snatching and tearing at clothes. Nettles sting Liska's exposed ankles, but the pain is nothing to the prickling at the back of her neck, the acute feeling that she is being *watched*.

Liska finds she is less afraid than she should be. Perhaps it is because this wood, just like her, is something unnatural, something *other*. By appearance alone, she fits more in the earthen weald than she ever did in the village—hair the color of freshly turned soil, skin olive and cheeks marked with freckles sucked out by the sun. For Kupała, she has worn festive strój: a crimson skirt patterned in pale flowers and an embroidered gorset over a lacy white blouse, her wild curls tamed into braids. Around her neck hangs a string

of beads in rowanberry red, both a festive accessory and a ward against demons. When it catches on a branch and tears free with a snap, it feels like irony.

She does not stop to pick it up.

The forest deepens. Sourceless lights flash in the distance, too large to be fireflies. Something rustles in the thicket to Liska's right; she could swear she sees a bowlegged *thing* lurking in the fog, but it crawls out of sight before her lantern's light can seize it. The next time she steps forward, something crunches underfoot. *A branch*, she tells herself.

Even if it feels more like bone.

She keeps going. This is her only chance, and desperation far outweighs her fear. In her mind, she can already see it—returning home to Mama and telling her she has nothing more to worry about, that Liska's magic will not trouble them again. No more pottery shattering without a touch, no more fires flaring in her presence, no more birds gathering at her window every morning, as if they want to tell her a secret she cannot understand.

What will life be like when she no longer has to keep her head down and pretend that the disasters trailing in her wake are mere coincidences? When she no longer has to rein in every emotion, lest it trigger her magic?

She had thought, really thought, that she'd finally had it under control.

Until Marysieńka.

The memory claws at her, but she pushes it back again. *Look toward the light*, she reminds herself. *Then you will not see the shadow behind you*.

But there is very little light in the night in the wood.

It is not long before Liska strays off the path. One distracted step, and when she turns around, she can no longer see the trampled trail—only trees ahead and trees behind, pressing ever closer, branches intertwining into a claustrophobic cage, and leaves slapping, cold and wet, against her face.

Her pulse thuds loudly in her ears. Paths like the one she just lost were carved by merchant caravans, passing from Orlica to the neighboring country of Litven. Those merchants enter the Driada prepared—they bring sturdy horses and rifles and swords, sometimes even hired guards. A week before their entry, they leave a tithe: meat or bread or coin at the mouth of the path they choose to follow, offerings for the demon Leszy.

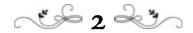
Leszy. A name known to every Stodoła villager, memorized like a prayer yet spoken like a curse. It is he who rules the Driada and keeps the spirits contained, he who protects the travelers in the wood and the villages around it. It is he who does not permit anyone to enter into his domain without paying the tithe—and all know that if the Leszy is not satisfied with what he receives, those who enter the Driada will not return.

Liska made her own offering the night before Kupała—a loaf of rye bread and dried kiełbasa, left at the opening of the path she intended to follow. Now that she has strayed, she has lost any hope of the Leszy's protection. Just as the stories tell of the Leszy guarding travelers, they also warn that those who stray from his paths will never find their way back to them again.

"It doesn't matter," Liska says to the wood, or to God, or perhaps in that moment they are one and the same. "I don't imagine you would hide the flower where it could be easily found."

That is when her toe strikes a root. She pitches forward gracelessly, crashing to her knees. The lantern slips out of her fingers, glass shattering with a muted *crack*.

The flame goes out.



### TREES WITH TOO MANY EYES

 $D_{\text{ARKNESS LEAPS FORTH LIKE A predator}}$ , swallowing the world. All that remains is a silhouette of the canopy above, angular leaves carving moonlight into mangled scraps. Liska loses the reins on her fear, and it breaks free in her chest, an overwhelming torrent.

Her journey becomes a blind stumble, hands scraping against rough bark and pricking on briars. Twigs catch her face, tangling in her hair until her braids come loose. Paranoia claws at the pit of her stomach, causing her magic to stir. *Calm*. She needs to calm down before she loses control. She begins to hum once more, as quietly as she can, focusing on the rise and fall of the melody and willing her heartbeat to match.

She reaches the second verse just as she sees *him*.

A white stag.

He rises out of the fog as if made from it, silken mist lapping at his flanks and frothing at his hooves like whitewater. His antlers arch forward, forming a majestic crown built of uncountable, birch-pale tines. Such appendages should only be an impediment in a forest, yet they do not tangle in the boughs above—in fact, it seems as if the trees bow away from him, pulling back their branches in deference.

The creature's oval pupils lock upon Liska, and the song dies on her lips.

"H-hello," she breathes, and then gives a curtsy for good measure. It seems appropriate, if silly.

The stag cocks his head. His eyes are fern green, forlorn and ancient, as if he has seen centuries of Orlica's history unravel before his eyes.

"I don't suppose you know the way to the fern flower?"

He gives a snort that sounds both exasperated and amused. Despite the fright, Liska's cheeks warm.

"Well," she says, flustered, "if you're not here to help, then I suppose you're here to eat me. Best get on with it, then."

The stag takes a step forward. His hooves leave luminous marks in the damp earth.

"At least I'll be feeding something lovely," Liska reasons, her heart in her throat. "Better than a strzygoń or a bies."

Another snort from the stag, a sound more human than it has any right to be. He takes one more step toward her, then wheels around abruptly. Before she can cry out, he bounds away into the wood, leaving glowing hoofprints behind. The marks remain, pulsing in the dark, looking almost like... like a trail.

But to where? Liska hesitates. She knows too well the tales of beautiful demons, of golden-haired poludnica wielding blood-smeared sickles and rusalka with their enchanted song, showing men their deepest desires to seduce them to watery graves. This could be a trick—is likely a trick. But it is the best option she has.

She follows the stag's prints. They fade as soon as she passes them, leaving light ahead and darkness behind. Slowly the wood loosens its chokehold, trunks straightening primly and haze lifting to reveal a tapestry of feathery moss. The stag's trail disappears abruptly, abandoning Liska at the lip of a river, a seething ink-black thing spilling from between twin crooked conifers. Moonlight shines in great beams around her, and the light is a relief, even if the stag's absence makes her anxious.

"What is this place?" Liska whispers—she dares not speak louder. "Why bring me here?"

She kneels hesitantly by the river, pine needles sharp against her palms as she leans forward to catch her breath. Thoughts of home come creeping in; by now, the villagers have likely gathered in the main square, dancing joyously as a fiddle croons. Perhaps Father Pawel is saying blessings, or young couples are holding hands and leaping over the bonfire. Oh, how she wishes to be among them.

Before longing can find her, a melody does.

It is unmistakable. Someone is singing nearby, a haunting tune that flows and eddies. The notes caress Liska, guiding her to her feet. They are comforting, warm as a kind

embrace or a blazing hearth in midwinter. *Come home, Liska Radost,* they say. *Your quest is over. You have found your place.* 

Liska blinks. There is a person standing upriver, as if they have been there all along. A beautiful woman, naked, flaxen curls clinging to her breasts, and arms outstretched in welcome. *Come, Liska, come*, she sings.

Liska nods, lightheaded. She is smiling, though she does not remember why. She also does not remember when she started walking, but she is now close enough to count the joints of the woman's overlong fingers.

A pang in her chest draws her up short. The feeling is dreadfully familiar, like butterflies trapped in the brittle cage of her ribs. A warning. Her magic is awake, and it is warning her.

Suddenly the woman's image flickers. Her flesh sinks against her bones, stringy hair dripping rivulets onto the scabby skin where her lips should be. When Liska recoils, the woman's glassy eyes widen, and her shape changes again. In her place stands Mama, with her spotless apron and severe expression. She approaches Liska, steely eyes softening, and reaches out to take her hands.

"Come home, Liska."

This time Liska ignores the warning in her chest. She wants nothing more than to take those hands, to feel the firm certainty of their grip. And that smile... how long has it been since she last saw her mother smile?

"You've done it, słoneczko," Mama repeats, gentler now. "It's over. Come home with me."

Liska blinks. *Stoneczko*—that was Tata's nickname for her, but never Mama's. Blunt, pragmatic Dobrawa Radost is not one for endearments.

Her mother is not here.

Liska flinches away, pressing her palms to her eyes. When she opens them again, Mama's face warps, her smile stretching wider and wider, impossibly wide, showing glimpses of needle-like teeth and a pale, thin tongue.

"You're wrong," Liska whispers to the creature. "Mama wants to send me away." She runs for the river.

The woman—no, *rusałka*—dives. She melts into the murky waters, vanishing in the current. Refusing to turn back, Liska leaps off the river's bank and lands on the opposite

side, knees buckling from the impact. She slips in the mud just as the rusałka emerges behind her, lipless mouth gaping in a screech and bony fingers scrabbling for Liska's skirts.

Liska gasps. She grips a fallen log and anchors herself, kicking with all her might. Her heel strikes something brittle that cracks like an eggshell—the accompanying shriek tells her that she has kicked the rusałka. The demon releases her. After a heartbeat, the water grows still and silent. Liska exhales shakily, braving a glance over her shoulder.

The rusałka leaps out of the water and seizes the straps of her gorset.

Liska does not have the time to scream. The world tilts as she is yanked off her feet and slammed backward into the glacial torrent, bubbles filling her vision.

Slimy fingers close around her throat.

Terror clenches Liska's innards as gritty river water fills her nostrils, darkness above and below as she is pulled down, down. The river is far deeper than it looks, and through water-blurred vision, she can see the pearly flashes of bones lining the riverbed. Panic seizes her, followed by a delirious sort of amusement. *That's it, then,* she thinks. *I will die and become ghastly décor*.

But something inside her resists. It wakes with the flutter of a thousand trapped wings, shoving painfully against the cage of her chest. Her magic, responding to her panic. It shatters through her skin in a bloom of blinding light, taking its usual shape: butterflies, a cloud of them, whirling and erratic. The burst of power shoves away the rusałka, but not before her nails rake painfully across Liska's throat. Liska does not waste a moment—she kicks off the demon's chest, propelling herself toward the bank, and breaks the surface with a gasp. Shuddering, she scrambles onto the rocks, barely pausing to cough up putrid water before righting herself on the sticky bark of a pine tree. She looks over her shoulder, expecting pursuit, but there is nothing.

The rusałka is gone.

The wood is still.

Liska staggers into a run. She does not stop, not even when she leaves the comfort of the river's moonlit clearing. Sweat coats her neck, and her pulse roars to the nauseating thrum of magic hammering at her chest. She needs to get away, away from that horrible river. Yet no matter how far she runs, she cannot find relief. These are the stories of her childhood given life, transformed from nightmares into reality.

She cannot even find comfort in her magic. It protected her this time, yes, because it chose to—unlike the last time, when it left blood on her hands and death in her wake. It can never be trusted. She needs to end this, and soon. But where is the flower?

As if hearing her question, a familiar shape appears in a copse up ahead, its antlered head angled toward her. The stag! Liska starts toward him, but the creature vanishes in a swirl of mist. "Wait!" she exclaims, panting, then laughs at her own folly. "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

There is no answer, only the sound of her own ragged breathing as she turns to survey her surroundings. She now stands on the edge of a shallow ravine, the sides plunging steeply into the maw of a gully. Surrounding her are nine peculiar trees forming a semicircle, their trunks bulging with strange lumps. At first glance, the lumps seem to be no more than burls, but as she looks closer, she realizes they are *pulsing*.

Liska presses her hands to her mouth, backing away, but it is too late.

Cracks fissure down the middle of each lump, the bark pulling apart to reveal bloodshot eyes. *Human* eyes. Human eyes that weep yellowed sap as they fix upon Liska.

The wood has seen her.

She backs away, but there is nowhere to go. Her heel slips on the lip of the ravine, and suddenly the ground is crumbling beneath her feet, the earth giving way beneath her.

Her flight is short. Her feet strike a crooked sapling, the impact tossing her to the ground. What follows is an uncontrolled slide. She gropes desperately for anything to slow her fall as her knees scrape brutally over stones and sharp branches. When she finally reaches the bottom, she collapses onto the ground.

She lies dazed for a moment—one single, bleary moment, the air knocked out of her, body aching. Then she forces herself to her knees, her hands scraping against something hard and... entirely out of place.

Cobblestones, laid side by side.

Startled, Liska scrambles upright. Ahead of her, a cobblestone path snakes into the dark, cracked and moss-eaten and haphazard. She stares at it apprehensively. A part of her is relieved to find a sign of civilization, but another is unsettled—she has heard of roads used for traveling through the spirit-wood, but this one seems too narrow to fit even the smallest cart. Yet if it is not one of those, then... where does it lead?

She finds her answer soon enough. Despite its size, she barely notices the manor in the gloom, tucked between the trees like a slumbering giant. It is not really a manor, anyway, more the memory of one—shattered windows and flaking paint and a crooked tower that barely remember how to be a home anymore. All is caged by a stone wall, veiled in ivy and fronted by a gate guarded by statues of stags. The gate might have been beautiful once, but now it hangs limp on its hinges, the spires a mess of rust and iron. The whole radiates a sort of miserable resignation, as if the manor has offered itself up as a calf to be slaughtered by the Driada.

The gate hinges give a squeal of protest when Liska pushes them open, startling her. Beyond, the gardens are a jungle unto themselves, overgrown hedges corrupted by briars. Only the flagstone path remains unveiled, littered with leaves and twigs. It meanders across the courtyard, leading to a small clearing where a fountain might have stood, had this estate belonged to the human world.

But it does not. It belongs to spirits and demons.

So in the middle, Liska does not find a fountain. Instead, she finds a fern, sprawling and lush and unnaturally green, so green it seems to glow.

And there, nestled in the halo of its fronds, is a single flower.



### A Not-So-Clever Fox

 ${
m T}$  HE FERN FLOWER IS AS beautiful as the legends say.

It looks more like a tongue of flame than a flower, blazing with hues of ochre and gold and vermilion. And just like a flame, Liska hesitates to touch it, certain it will scorch her fingers. It gives off a sound, a steady thrum, like a pulse, like a *heartbeat*. As if every root in the wood is a vein, every branch an artery, and all of them find their home in this small bloom.

Rooted in place by both awe and disbelief, Liska stares at the flower. She's done it. The tales were wrong. She's found the flower, and she is still alive—for now.

The most important task still awaits: to pick the flower and make her wish. *Let my magic be gone*, she will say. What will it feel like when her wish is granted? Will her magic vanish as if it were never there, or will it wither little by little? Then, once it is all done, she must still find her way out of this woodland maze. But there is a glimmer of hope, and to Liska that is enough. Like a beggar, she has learned to enjoy crumbs.

Without further hesitation, she reaches out. Carefully she cups her hands around the flower's silken petals, the rhythm of its power rushing through her. *Throb*, *throb*, louder and louder, until her bones feel like they will shatter from the force. She pushes through, taking the flower's stem, her wish on her lips, and—

"It's lovely, isn't it?"

The voice is not human. It cannot be, not the way it echoes all around. She has never heard the devil speak, but if she did, she imagines he would sound the same: sultry and

beguiling, smooth as water along a riverbed. She looks around in alarm, trying to locate the source, but with the pulsing of the fern flower's magic still rattling her bones, she can hardly tell up from down.

"Unfortunately, little thief, I cannot let you have it."

Suddenly the stag is there. He stands in the gateway, his head tilted to one side. "What is your name?" he asks pleasantly.

The voice is *his*. The stag speaks, though his mouth does not move. And Liska knows now that he is not a stag at all. He is the warden of this wood, and it would be more than unwise to give him her name.

"Are you a fish?" the stag muses, a sound far too predatory to belong to such a gentle creature. "No? Then do not gape like one. A name is a simple thing, yet you cannot give it. Are you simple? If you are, then I shall be glad. It will make my job far easier."

Liska closes her mouth, opens it again. This time her voice obeys, though it trembles slightly. "I am *not* simple."

"That, I shall be the judge of." He takes a step forward, then another, each pace arrogant and taunting, a tomcat cornering a mouse. "You still have not given me your name."

"Must I?" she challenges him. Her magic batters against her chest, a warning almost as strong as with the rusałka. "I don't need you to tell me yours. I know who you are."

He flicks an ear, coming even closer. The fern is now all that stands between them. "Oh?"

"The Leszy."

A pause. Wind howls through the interlude, filling the air with the sound of shuddering leaves. The stag raises his head and takes one more step.

And begins to rot.

There is no other way to describe it. As if devoured by insects, his flesh withers away, his muscles decomposing as silvery fungi erupt along his flank, then rot in turn. The skin falls from his face to reveal yellowed bone and cracked teeth; his eyes sink into his skull and vanish in the blackness of gaping sockets. His skeleton breaks and shifts and re-forms; it is like his body is taking itself apart and reassembling into a whole new shape.

Into a man.

No, a half-man; the stag's ghoulish skull remains, hiding his face from view. Moonpale, he moves with unnatural grace, his wool sukmana rustling softly as it brushes against the fern. His skin is wan and ashen, his hair white with age. He wears the wilderness like a trophy, the shapes of thistles and thorns embroidered on his sleeves, and viridian hues striping the sash around his waist.

"Yes, I am he," says the demon. He is tall and lean in stature, holding himself with the elegance of an aristocrat. "As for you, I will only ask once more. What is your name?"

"Kasia," Liska says quickly.

The demon goes still, and so does the wood around him, as if every bracken and bough is straining to listen to their conversation. Then he murmurs, "I can hear the skips in your heartbeat, little liar. Try again."

Liska's throat constricts with shock. She swallows, then speaks once more, chastened now. "L-Liska." That is all she will give him. Her surname is hers to keep.

He chuckles warmly. "Liska, Liseczka... oj, lisku. You're not a very clever fox, are you?" The closer he comes, the more he looms, and she fidgets beneath the void-like stare of those empty sockets. "Yet you survived the rusałka. How?"

"Luck," Liska says.

"Lying again."

"I'm not—"

"You saw through her illusions, didn't you?" He leans forward and sniffs, deeply. "You have magic in your blood, not-so-clever fox. That makes you useful. Tell me, then—what did you want from my flower?"

*His* flower. Of course. Like the rusałka, the fern flower is a trap, or perhaps a test. Another rope in the net of the Driada's devilry, a net she is hopelessly tangled in.

The Leszy clicks his tongue. "Oj, you really are simple. Let me help you, then. Is it riches? Success? No, wait. With little girls like you, it's always unrequited love. Who is he, then? Farmhand? Baker? Heir to a fortune? Come, come, not-so-clever fox. There is always a story."

Somewhere halfway through his speech, anger begins to simmer in her stomach. When he pauses for breath, she blurts: "I want my magic gone."

The answer seems to surprise the Leszy. He leans back, reassessing her carefully. "And why would you want that?"

*Marysieńka*, she almost says. *And Tata*, her mind adds, but she shoves the voice back. She does not answer, only hugs her arms around herself. "Will you kill me?"

"Do you want me to?" comes the taunting response. His long fingers are suddenly at her neck, a hard nail scraping up her throat to lift her chin. "You seem like a timid thing, yet you were bold enough to trespass onto my estate and steal from my garden. You must want it badly, to come all this way."

Liska nods, lowering her eyes instinctively. Demure, polite Liska, easy to miss in a crowd. If you give them no reason to notice you, Mama likes to say, then they will not notice anything unusual about you.

"I have been alone for so long, little fox. Watching over this wood consumes my waking moments. So I offer you this: serve me for a year, and when you are done, I will grant your wish. Even if"—he chuckles softly—"even if it is the most ridiculous wish I have ever heard."

He speaks it like a verdict yet offers it like a bargain. Liska steps back, biting her lip. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I will let you go," the demon says. "But you will be without the flower and without my protection. I am the warden of this wood, and there are consequences to crossing me. But perhaps you will be one of the lucky few. Perhaps you will make it back to the border before my denizens catch a whiff of you and decide they want a taste."

He is terrible, Liska realizes. And worse, he is insufferably arrogant. She presses a steadying hand to her chest, trying to find reason in all the madness. A year is not a long time. It is four seasons, and those always pass quickly—snow melting and snowdrops blooming before she manages to savor the crisp scents of autumn. She can survive a year away from home, even if it pains her to imagine what Mama will do when she finds Liska's note and realizes where she has gone.

It will be worth it. A year is worth it. A year is enough for Liska's mistakes to fade into distant memory, for the villagers to forget their suspicions and find newer, fresher scandals for gossip. Perhaps it will even be enough for Pani Prawota to abandon her obsession with proving Liska a witch. After all, she has already gotten what she wanted: Liska driven from Stodoła, no longer a danger to its people. And when Liska returns at last, her magic gone, that much will remain true. She will be just like any other villager. She will belong.