

## *Forgotten Roots*

The shadow of the raven announces its arrival. It swoops from the trees, finding footing in the thicket of blackberries. Surefooted, she knows where to grasp to avoid the long thorns, but the bush welcomes her friend, stretching to offer respite all the same. She shakes out her feathers and nestles into the shadows.

"Welcome," the bush greets the raven. She's always grateful for the return of her friend.

Raven bobs on her legs, nodding in acknowledgment to what the bush offers. "I've flown a long way," she caws. "To see how you've grown."

"Rest as long as you need."

"May I eat of your berries?"

The bush shivers with gratitude to be asked. It widens the tangle of brambles to let the raven delve deeper where the fattest berries grow. The raven always brings the best gossip, and scatters the bush's seeds to allow them to keep spreading across the forest. The bush is happy to share what it holds, as it was Raven who first brought it here. First besought the Forest Queen for a home for what it carried. Back then the Forest Queen was warm, her skin the bark of the birch, her hair a flurry of moss and flowers. She loved the land, and coaxed the blackberry bush into fruition with tender attention.

"Use caution today. We are not alone," the bush says quietly.

Raven looks out from the thicket after swallowing a berry. Her eyes fall upon a man pushing a wheelbarrow. "A farmer?"

"A farmer."

"Will you be safe?" Raven asks.

"I am strong," the blackberry bush assures her.

The bush snatches a gasp of pain as the farmer begins to chop at the soil with a hoe. The blade cuts at Blackberry's roots, and gloved hands reach to pull them from the ground.

"He's hurting you," says Raven.

"He will try," says Blackberry. "But I am not so easily dismissed." Blackberry stretches out, feeling the ends of her roots and knowing they will endure. They will grow again.

"If he only asked," said Raven, "surely you would yield some land."

"He has asked for nothing," Blackberry says. "It is not for me to yield."

Raven gulps down another berry and nods, splatters of berry juice misting over the branches of Blackberry. "She will be angry."

"She will be angry," Blackberry agrees.

"I must go," says Raven. "Be careful, my friend."

Blackberry widens her leaves and bends her thorns away to give Raven room to take flight. She watches her friend hop, hop, then take to the air.

Blackberry keeps an eye on the farmer who wipes his brow as he hoes the loam of her bed. The pain is unbearable, throbbing from roots to leaf, and Blackberry sends a prayer to that the Forest Queen will hurry to right this wrong.

#

Dusk is gathering the folds of its dress as it readies to dance the night in. The dark moon rises, only the faintest splinter of light giving counterpoint to the juicy peach of the setting sun. Blackberry watches the farmer gather his tools, place them in the wheelbarrow, and prepare to retreat to his ill-gotten cottage for the night.

The leaves rustle, and Blackberry feels the movement through her thicket, feels the too-light steps of the yearling as it noses through the branches and barbs. Velvety antlers encircled with tendrils of green vines, moss covering the faintly dotted coat. It pauses to watch the scene for a moment, contemplating, it's prey's eyes too calm for so close an encounter.

Blackberry holds a breath. The Forest Queen has come, has answered her call for help. The breeze smells of her anger as she steps

out into the fading light. Small white flowers grow in the divots of her steps as she moves forward, too close to be cautious. Too close for a deer. The farmer pauses, and Blackberry can tell he's weighing the size of her to see if she would be a prize to catch.

But the Forest Queen is no prey.

Forward she steps, bold and sure of her safety. Blackberry sees the farmer reach slowly toward the wheelbarrow. Reach for his hoe once more. He thinks to make a meal of this tender near-fawn.

"You would do two crimes against me." The Forest Queen's voice comes from everywhere at once, but no louder than the whisper of the evening's breeze.

He freezes, the hoe slipping from his hands as he realizes his folly.

Instead of kneeling, he stands straight. "What does the Forest Queen wish with me?"

She walks a dotted circle around him, hoof prints trapping him inside the shape. "Do you intend to insult me by pretending you do not know?" When he doesn't answer with more than a tilt of his chin, she continues to her point. "You've taken what is not yours to claim."

"I paid the offering," he argues.

Blackberry feels the shift of the Forest Queen's ire from passive to something feral. "As an afterthought. You offer what you do not need. What you care not to lose." It flashes in her large eyes. Tension unrolls around them. "This is not the Coastlands. I will not be placated with fish."

"It is all we have."

"That is neither true nor my problem."

Sweat beads on the farmer's brow. "What would you have of us?"

"Of you," the Forest Queen corrects. "What is an apt price for building your home of my bones? Of stripping my skin from my back and flailing my flesh with your tools?" She stamps one spindly leg into the turned soil. "I am the land. It is me. You've taken of my body, my life." She lifts her snout at Blackberry, her eyes softening. "You will tend these blackberries as you should have tended me."

"Meaning?"

Her eyes linger on Blackberry, who wonders how she became entangled in this.

"You have until the new moon to figure it out." She cants her head.

“And the three nights thereof to carry it out.” She winds around him, nuzzling him with the side of her head like a pet might, scenting him to let others know she now claims him.

With a dash of her foot she breaks the circle around him, and he backs away as if she were a fierce beast staring him down, and not in a body so delicate. As if her still rounded antlers would pierce his flesh. Blackberry knows that the Forest Queen could do much worse with much less. The farmer is foolish to think he can escape. Blackberry hasn't seen anyone escape in the hundred years she's been rooted to this land. It is unlikely the farmer could do better.

#

He comes to her the first night of the new moon. His desperation is palpable. He seeks answers, and Blackberry has none to give. She has no more insight on this deal than he. She's been forced to treat just the same.

But she does not forget who she is. She does not yield to him. Whatever this arrangement must be, it is his to figure out. She will endure long after his body returns to the soil of the forest floor. His need to enforce his will where he is otherwise helpless drives him to push into the thicket, his clothes snagging on the long thorns, the winding brambles tripping him up until he catches his skin. Her thorns are strong, and she parts his flesh without intention. His blood runs down his fingers, dripping into the ground and leaving dots of impact. He clenches a hand over the cut to still the pouring.

She feels the rush almost instantly. Like a thirst awakened from long ago. Greedily she absorbs what he's offered, her roots and branches rushing to expend this vitae into her needs. Blossoms bud and the berries hanging from her fingers plump. She feels so full of vigor, so full of life that she could almost step from the ground itself. Instead she crawls, her roots reaching further toward the humble cottage, but she widens an arch of herself to allow the farmer safe passage out. The creaking of her branches pulls him rod-straight. He backs away, nearly tripping over his own feet.

The dawn comes and so does his partner, a slight woman whose hips have only begun to widen with the burden of maternity. It's apparent in her gait though not in her form as she welcomes herself through the archway Blackberry creates of her branches.

Blackberry aches with the heaviness of fruit, and leans up to entice

the woman to pluck as many as she can carry. When she's done, the partner returns to the cottage to lay down her load and returns with a bucket to collect more. It's not long before Blackberry's branches are lighter, and the sweet scent of berries cooking within the cottage accompanies the breeze.

Night falls, and the farmer returns. This time he brings a blade, and Blackberry fears he will slash at her bones and drive her away. Instead, he slashes open his veins once more, and lets his blood rush to the bed. Blackberry once again is filled to the brim with more life than she can hold, and by morning she has exploded once more, branches so full that fruit drops to the ground, calling a feeding frenzy of the denizens who make the dark, damp plot of earth at her feet their home. Again the wife comes, and again she leaves with a bounty.

The farmer looks pale as he begins his chores, but still he returns the last night of the new moon to enact this strange ritual once more.

Month after month he comes under the cover of the new moon. Month after month his wife grows plump like Blackberry's fruit while he grows thin. Blackberry's offering is plentiful, but the crops he plants thrive even as he grows too weak to tend them every day.

Blackberry begins to hunger.

During the days between moons she yearns, she reaches for the farmer when she sees him in the field. Her berries become sparse as she's too tired to grow them. The blood in his veins calls to her. The sweat of his brow is a cruel mockery of what she wants, what she longs for, and it feels like eons rather than days before he comes to her in the night yet again.

The partner worries. It's evident in the lines that form around her eyes, the crease of her brow as she watches his health flag. She scrubs blood from his shirts and hangs them on the creaking clothes lines to snap in the clean breeze, but she asks no questions. The berries keep growing, as does her belly, and they live on the funds from the blackberry jam.

Not until Winter does she question the bounty.

She is no fool, Blackberry can tell. She knows the late-growing berries are unnatural. She knows there must be magic afoot. Still she harvests her berries and cooks the jam, and it's not until the farmer falls in the field near the thicket that she asks why.

When he doesn't show at the new moon, Blackberry shudders with

anger. With the pangs of hunger that should not be. She is but a thicket, not some fauna in need of blood to continue to grow. Still she aches for his blood, and she begins to encroach upon the house. Her roots encircle the building, her leaves grow up the walls until they can peek in the windows. She finds the farmer in his bed, begging his wife to let him go. To let him return to the thicket.

The wife refuses, and Blackberry hates her for it.

"You seem tired," says Raven. The Winter sun barely warms her branches as her friend settles upon her usual perch. "I've come to tell you of the lands beyond and ask you for berries."

"I have none to give," she laments. She feels betrayed by the Forest Queen, who has tied her to this human. She did not ask to be part of this deal, yet she is bound to it just as the farmer.

"And why not? Look at how you have grown, how you have flourished since last we met."

Blackberry sighs, her branches heaving under the weight of her hunger. She tells Raven of the farmer, of his blood, and how it makes her veins pump with life.

Raven tilts her head as only birds can manage, sadness in her eyes. "The queen has cursed you as surely as she has cursed the humans." Raven is always wise, despite her gossip's tongue. Or perhaps because of it. It's hard to say, and Blackberry is too tired to think on it for too long.

"All I want is the farmer's blood."

"That is unlike you," says Raven. "I have never seen you so despondent." She watches Blackberry reach for the farmhouse. Watches her spend her strength to climb the timbers that make up the edifice of the little cottage. To entwine it possessively.

"I can't stop," whispers Blackberry.

Raven bobs on a sagging branch. "You must ask the Forest Queen to release you," she pleads.

Blackberry sighs, the whole of her shuddering, and shaking even the cottage. The wife looks out the window and frowns.

#

This time the Queen comes on legs of branch with arms of vines. Her fingers caress Blackberry's leaves like a mother might a newborn.

"Why do you weep?" she asks, her voice neither hushed nor open.

The fall of sleeping brown grass that is the waves of her hair spills over one knotted shoulder.

"I hunger." Blackberry looks to the moon. The new moon draws near. She despairs that perhaps the farmer will not return. Perhaps she has taken too much already with this enforced gluttony that has become her new way. "Please, end my punishment."

"Punishment?" The word carries on a rolling wind that whisks across Blackberry's leaves. "No, child, I gave you a gift."

"A gift?" Grief overtakes Blackberry.

"Look how you flourish. See how even now you grow."

"But what if he does not come this cycle?" A chill rips through her. She has not seen the farmer in the garden for days.

"Then go to him. Make him give what you crave."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Blackberry sobs. The sad berries that have withered on her vines tremble and fall, making splatters of blood on the white of the snowy ground.

"Because I love you more than you know." There is a sadness to the Forest Queen's voice that Blackberry cannot place, but that tugs at her memory. It evokes something warm that tingles in her frozen roots.

#

She comes to Blackberry in the cold of night, under the cover of the new moon. She's figured out the time, and for the first time in weeks, Blackberry perks up, the frost of her leaves rustling.

The farmer's partner awkwardly lowers herself to her knees, her belly swollen and round and making it difficult to manage. But she does. She pricks her finger on one of Blackberry's thorns, letting a single drop splatter against the snow.

"Forest Queen," she calls out. "Please let my husband go. He has paid enough."

When the Forest Queen answers, it is with a bitter wind. The wife shudders under it, pulling a shawl tighter around her shoulders. This time she stands tall, a pouf of cedar boughs adorn her head. Snow coats her like a skin and she sparkles, beautiful in the night. "I did not make the deal with you," says the Forest Queen, her voice softer than her presence suggests.

"Please, he is too weak. He will die. Spare his life."

"That was not our deal," she says. Not cruelly, almost sad. As if it

pains her to stand firm. As if she herself did not do this.

“Then make a new deal with me.”

The Forest Queen considers this, a frown forming in the knots of her face. “Bear your child in the thicket, let your blood nourish my berry bush, then leave this land. Your debt will be paid in full.” She adds, without apology but with that same grief, she adds, “Your husband’s fate is his own.”

Blackberry hears them argue the next night. The farmer insists on returning to the thicket. His wife pleads for him to save his own life. Ultimately he wins, but this time, his papery skin cannot heal, and he dies at the foot of his bed.

In her grief, the wife bears a child, deep in the thicket like she has been asked. Her blood stains the snow, seeps into the ground, hot steam rising from the sanguine melt. Blackberry drinks deep, the rush to her roots and vines immeasurable. She bursts with berries. The wife wraps her child in a blanket and collects as many berries as she can carry.

She moves to the town the next day.

Seasons pass. Winter becomes Spring, Spring turns into Summer. Blackberry withers, her leaves brown and dry. She feels unable to go on without the offering, even if her roots remain strong. Summer wanes into Autumn when the new farmer arrives. He is dressed like those from the Coastlands, carries little, and is excited to find Blackberry, wilted though she is. He eats of her berries, replenishing his goods. Blackberry stirs, and he pricks his fingers on the thorns, his blood slaking the thirst that overwhelms her. It rushes through her veins, stretches into her leaves, though it be so little. Immediately she perks. The farmer sees her branches heave with quickly growing berries. Surely these enchanted berries are the key to his survival.

He moves into the house. He chops at Blackberry’s roots to make room for crops come Spring. He takes of her bounty and survives the winter.

The song of the nightingale lures him from his new home. He finds the bird protected in Blackberry’s branches, her too-knowing eyes peering out into the near-dark. The nightingale shimmers in the night, her breast bursting with lichen that winds over the delicate threads of her legs.

“You’ve taken what is not yours,” the nightingale sings. The tones



are low and menacing. She is tired, Blackberry can hear it in the notes of her song. Tired but angry. Tired of humans taking from her what is not theirs.

Blackberry finds herself begging for his blood once more. Her branches reach to embrace the man, her thorns the sharp claws of a hunter. Where she was once docile, where she once was content with the rain and the sun, she has been thrust into this prison of need.

“Be still, my love,” the nightingale cautions. “He must come of his own accord.”

The farmer looks at the nightingale and knows what he has done. He falls to his knees, his tears pleading for mercy that Blackberry knows will not come.

What’s worse is she hopes it will not come. She yearns for his blood. She can feel it pumping through his veins and working his heart. Her tendrils snake out from the thicket bed, seeking the man. Wrapping about him with a quickness that rivals any predator. She will not wait. The Forest Queen will not force her into this deal again. Her thirst will be sated on her terms.

The farmer has no time to escape. Her branches wind tightly around him, her thorns piercing deeply into his flesh. She bites with every sharp edge and drinks. Deep. Deeper. She lurches forward into it and drains him to the bone.

“You did not give him a chance to choose,” the Queen scolds, though it is halfhearted and flat. She flutters from the branch, her limbs elongating and her back straightening to standing. She is tree and bird and beast all in one as she regards Blackberry. There is a smile touching her lips. “My work here is done.”

“What do you mean?”

The Forest Queen leans over, nuzzling the side of her bird’s head against Blackberry’s thorns. “Now you will never let them take from us again.”

The Forest Queen takes to the air, disappearing past the forest boundary, and Blackberry quietly sobs.