

ICE SONG

10— Devilment and Witchery

Sorykah helped the dogs tow the heavy sled over the rocky yard, approaching the little house with her heart in her mouth. Pavel had urged her to garner an invitation inside, but what would she use for bait? How did vampires get themselves invited over their victims' thresholds?

As she stood staring at the barred door, clutching Kika's line in hand, Sorykah was astonished to see a small window crack open and a rough wooden ledge drop down bearing a large elaborately carved, red and black painted box.

"What have you brought me?" asked a deep female voice with the texture of heavy, raw silk.

Sorykah peered at the waiting box and the closed door, searching for the speaker. She had arrived at the party without a gift. What among her possessions would entice a witch? Should she offer one of the dogs? Was Rava to be this stranger's half-human sacrifice?

"Umm," she stalled, rummaging through her possessions for something of interest. She held up the musher's vllå with its beautiful, carved ivory handle of walrus tusk.

"No, no, have one of those," answered the voice.

She stuffed the vllå into her gear bag and patted her coat pockets, thinking of coin and cash, and glad to remember the crumpled paper Pavel had thrust upon her as she departed the Stuck Tongue. Unfolding it, she scanned its two obscure lines of cramped, laborious handwriting.

"Ah, most unhelpful, Pavel!" Sorykah lamented. What was she to do with this?

"What have you there?" queried the voice. "Read it to me."

Sorykah cleared her throat of ash and read, "White within and white without, the armored heart where golden treasure is hid."

"Ooh, how delightful," cooed the voice, "a riddle! A moment please..."

There was silence as the riddle was deciphered, the woman's voice repeating the lines until the answering image crystallized in her mind.

"I know it! An egg, yes? Am I right?" She cackled, murmuring her own congratulations. "Is that the answer?"

Pavel had not included that tidbit of vital information but it seemed to make sense to Sorykah; she envisioned a large white egg, rich with a sunny yellow yolk.

"Excellent! Or should I say eggcellent? Ha ha! Tap the box, please!"

Sorykah rapped the painted lid with her knuckle and the ledge folded itself into the house.

"Well done, my dear! Big as an ostrich egg, this will keep me in cake for month!"

Sorykah waited for the door to open and admit them, but nothing happened.

"My dear, you've awarded me one gift yet there are two of you on my doorstep. Am I to choose which of you I welcome and who is left in the cold?"

"Another riddle then?" Sorykah desperately wished she were better at this sort of thing. Word play and games of wit had always left her numbed. Glancing round the grassy ring, she sought inspiration. Through the smoke and haze, the setting sun was a

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vivid, deep orange, trailing long crimson fingers across the sky and the riddle began to shape itself from soot and sparks. “All right, I think I’ve got one.”

The box reappeared on the ledge.

“Same indoors and out, while dimpled roundabout.”

“Ahh, she’s clever this one. Took me a moment, it’s been so long since I’ve seen one, I’d almost forgotten all about them. Is it...an orange?”

“Yes! It is!” Sorykah chirped, pleased with herself.

“Tap the box my dear, and walk in.”

Sorykah rapped the box again and watched it disappear into the house, accompanied by loud exclamations of delight. “Well done again...a fairy among toadstools, honestly...who visits a witch and offers money...” and then, more faintly, “...gather my lost souls...”

And at once the comfort and pleasure Sorykah found drained away as she remembered with whom she dealt...

... **“Oh yes. My brother.** Isn’t that the reason why you’ve come? It’s reason enough for the others. No one would brave the waste just to view my findings, botany not being the big draw these days. Science has always taken a backseat to chivalrous adventure and quests for fame,” she concluded, stacking discarded orange peels and stripping away any remaining pith.

“I hadn’t realized...” Sorykah trailed, embarrassed to admit her own trepidation.

“No matter,” Shanxi waved away her concern. “No one does. I accepted that burden when I made the decision to establish myself here. The volcano is a rich source of minerals and the ecosystem here is perfectly suited to facilitate my experiments. There’s no other environment on earth which approximates the conditions I require to pursue my studies with my...”

Sorykah expected Shanxi to say ‘children’ but instead she finished her sentence with the more neutral ‘plants.’

“You haven’t been around any other people for five years?”

“No. Before that, I hadn’t seen anyone for three years. They used to make the trek quite often in the beginning. Some daring, desperate soul knocked at my door every few months when the weather allowed a crossing. I’m sure there are more than a few frozen corpses out there from those who were neither smart enough nor strong enough to survive the journey.

“Time and trial wear on both memory and reputation, however. I fear that better aspects of my character have been sufficiently savaged over the years. Myth is much more entertaining than mundanity.” Shanxi stared at her guest. Sorykah squirmed in her seat but a few deep breaths and the emanations of the witch’s plants soothed her and kept her grounded.

“It’s true. I expected someone much different. You’re about as much a witch as I am.” Reflecting on her own secret, Sorykah realized that between the two of them, she might be more than qualified to hold the title Dark Witch. “Why do they call you the Dark Witch?”

“Ah, that’s the stuff of legends. It’s an old story, not worth repeating.” Shanxi dismissed the question and Sorykah realized the conversation was over...

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Soft singing woke Sorykah from a refreshing sleep. Oenathe plants fluttered in joyous response to Shanxi's dulcet voice as she tinkered, intent on her work.

"How long have I been asleep?" Sorykah rubbed her eyes and yawned broadly.

"Long enough for this sprout to mature and flower," Shanxi tended a foot-high electric green oenathe staggering beneath the weight of clustered buttery blossoms powdered with clinging pollen. "Since oenathe can gain an inch every hour, I'd say about five hours. Look here. These blooms are new, its first. Each plant matures within twenty-four hours of cracking its seed case. The flowers will last three days, drop off and die and if not pollinated within those seventy-two hours, that particular plant will have lost its one chance to reproduce." Shanxi used a thin, long-handled wooden spoon to sample a pinch of granules from a vial and sprinkled it over the flower's ripe and waiting anthers.

"Short and sweet, the oenathes' lives mimic our own human ones. Rather makes the pleasure all the more keen, don't you think?" Pleased with herself, Shanxi turned and scratched brief notations in a spiral bound book.

Sorykah asked, "What are you doing? Is this your research?"

"Look around you and tell me if I ever do anything else!" She laughed and tossed her head back, an act Sorykah found compellingly earthy. Shanxi was unaware of her devastating gorgeousness. Her curiosity, open friendliness and lack of self-importance, combined with a singular ambition made Shanxi a formidable figure. It wasn't hard to see why she had been saddled with the unfortunate moniker "Dark Witch."

"My dear, you gaze upon the fruits of some forty years' loving labor." Shanxi swept her arm in an arc, encompassing racks of tremulous greenery. "When I first began my task, the oenathe was but a weed, a polar garden pest. There had been some limited studies conducted to determine why such a fragile organism could thrive so well in such extreme climes, but none had yet pursued the oenathe's amazing regenerative abilities. Like a salamander regrowing its own severed tail, or the earthworm that gains a new head if cut in two, the oenathe can similarly defy death.

"It was my desire that such a valuable herb not be wasted in wrinkle creams and eternal youth potions when its promise is so great. Oenathe are malleable and adaptive, much more so than other plants. It's what makes them unique."

"But why here? Why the volcano?" Sorykah crouched to stroke Kika's neck. Exhausted by their arduous day, the dogs slumbered in a heap, a cozy pile of warm fur and twitching ears.

"Why waste my life out here in the Sique's arse-end when I could be a lauded professor, stoking vainglorious fires?" Shanxi cocked an eyebrow at Sorykah.

"That's not what I meant," Sorykah said.

"I'm sure you noticed the change in air quality when you entered." Snapping a few stray stems from her seedling, Shanxi laid the severed twigs aside. "My plants emit more than thrice the normal volume of oxygen. We may as well be in a rainforest right now, rather than at the base of an active volcano. Their overactive photorespiration is the happy product of many years careful genetic manipulation. Some would say it's a waste to breed plants to breathe, yet what men deem wasteful is too often the product of their own sloth. I've bred my oenathe with the local alpine flora that grow inside the green ring

and they have adapted to the sulfuric air and reduced sunlight. The result is a sort of oenathe super-breed.”

Sorykah experienced that unnerving, creepy-crawly sensation she’d first had when lurking outside in the yard. Next would come cackling bouts of insane laughter followed by Shanxi’s glib confession of her plans to take over the world and turn the planet’s population into a corps of mindless botany-research drones.

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