

Outcast

I stared out from Dark Wood at the village, envy and hatred filling me. The villagers walked about, minding their own business, laughing in the sunlight which I could not enter. If the sunlight touched me, the people would see my scars and, as they had once before, would draw away, frightened. They saw me as a monster, because of my burnt face and my missing eye; because I did not look like them.

I had promised long ago to give them a reason to fear me, since they were afraid anyway, and so every night, I would sneak into the village and “haunt” the people. I’d been doing this for a year before things changed.

After the first several months, my conscience whispered, *This isn’t good. You shouldn’t be doing this. How does this prove to the villagers that you’re not the monster they see? Why have you become what they think you are?*

To which I would reply, *I haven’t harmed anyone!*

You don’t need to damage someone physically to hurt them.

I would brush this last comment aside and continue my campaign, though always with less enthusiasm than the night before. By the following dusk, however, I would be just as eager to cause chaos as I had been before

my conscience spoke, and as time wore on, the small voice grew quieter and quieter.

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I was sitting on a tree branch, hidden by the thick leaves, thinking of what I would do that night, when I heard two young boys talking. Grinning, I prepared to drop down and frighten them. Sliding from the branch, I dropped in front of the two boys as they walked, and one screamed and fainted. The other, to my astonishment, glared at me.

“Look at what you did to my friend! You killed him!” he snapped, kneeling beside the unconscious child. I blinked, startled by the dark-haired boy’s reaction. No one had ever dared to shout at me!

“He’s fine,” the boy went on. Standing, he strode towards me until he stood directly before me and scolded, “That was a very naughty thing to do! If I did that, Father would punish me. You’re grown-up. You should know better!”

I blinked again as he continued, “Are you the one who ruined Mrs. Myer’s life by putting mice in her house?”

At last he would begin to be afraid of me! I knew that when I smiled, my face was more hideous, so I leered down at him as I replied, “Yes, I am. And I killed the farmer’s chickens, and I burned the cattles’ haystacks.”

“You are very bad,” the boy rebuked me. “Why would you do that?”

My smile changed to a sneer. “Because humanity has shunned me. Why should I act like a human if I don’t look like one? I will give everyone a reason to fear me!”

“Why?” This simple question caught me off guard. “Do you *want* the villagers to hate you?”

“N-no,” I replied. “But they do.”

“And you don’t want to change their minds?”

“I tried once, and they ran away from me!”

“ ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day.’ Come with Cabhrú and me back to the village. We’ll help you.”

“No!” I answered furiously. “I don’t want help. I don’t need help! Everyone will be afraid of me!”

“Why? Don’t you want to be a human?”

“I’ve already tried! The villagers were afraid of me!”

“Because they don’t know you. They’re afraid of what they don’t understand and what doesn’t look like themselves. Please try again.”

Memories of every time I had mistreated the village came rushing back to me, and I hated myself suddenly. I had been a fool! “It’s too late,” I told the boy. “They’ll never forgive me.”

“I think they could,” he answered. “Besides, it’s never too late to be sorry. Come with us. My name’s Logh, by the way. What’s yours?”

“Aithrí.”

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When I entered the village, Logh leading me by the hand like a child, the villagers drew back in horror, several screaming at Logh and Cabhrú to run. I felt anger rising up within me, but I tried to contain it. For once in my life, I felt hopeful.

“Logh, what are you doing?” a woman—his mother—shouted. “Get away from him!” She ran to her son’s side, but he shook off her attempts to drag him away.

“I want to help him,” Logh told her. “He needs help.”

“He’s a monster—look at him! And he’s been doing horrible things to us during the night! Why do you want to help such a thing?!”

If my tear ducts had not been burned and I could have wept, I would have. How could I take back everything I had done? I realized, suddenly, that I had never felt happy when I mistreated the village; only as if it was the only thing I *could* do. Now that those things had been done, and I couldn’t undo them, the villagers would always hate me.

“He’s sorry,” Logh told her, but his mother was unconvinced. “Please let me help him.”

“If he was sorry, he would weep. Come home,” she countered. “I don’t want you talking to monsters.”

She pulled Logh away from me, and although he argued and Cabhrú was still with me, I felt despair take hope’s place. Turning away, I ran into the forest, despising even stronger than before everything I had done. Why had I wanted to be feared? Why had I wanted to be thought of as a monster? Had I truly wanted to be what the villagers thought I was? It didn’t matter, now, what I had wanted. Everything was ruined.

“Aithrí!” someone shouted, but I hid myself until my pursuer, Cabhrú, had passed. Then, I ran, though I didn’t know where I was going.

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A month passed in which I remained in Dark Wood, hardly eating or drinking. I stayed in the trees, and when someone walked beneath me, I prayed they would not see me. Then, one day, I saw Logh and Cabhrú wandering below, and I pressed myself against the tree, hoping not to be seen.

“And you haven’t seen Aithrí since?” Logh was asking sadly. Cabhrú nodded slowly. “I hope he’s alright.” Once they had passed, I slipped out of

my tree and crept in the opposite direction they had been going in. The sight of Logh caused me to despair again; it was too late for me. I went to the edge of the forest and watched the villagers mill about, and I longed for tears with which to cry.

Suddenly, a girl came running out of one of the houses. “Help!” she shouted. “Somebody help! My brother’s sick—we need medicine. Please, I don’t want him to die!”

I heard one of the villagers mutter, “It’s the witch’s daughter.” No one moved to help. Anger filled me again, but I swallowed it down. Then, taking a deep breath, I slipped out of the trees and strode towards the girl who stood alone in the villager square. She stared at me in horror, then moved to flee.

“Wait,” I said. My hoarse voice sounded like a monster’s to myself, but the girl halted and stared at me. “I can help.”

“Can you?” Hope suddenly shone in her face, banishing her terror of me. “Please do!” I followed her to her parents’ house, then entered. She led me to her brother’s room, where he lay, hardly breathing, on his bed. Looking at him, I realized I’d seen this illness before, and I knew where to find the herbs for him.

“I’ll be back,” I told the girl before slipping outside. I made my way to the forest with only one thought in my mind: to help. Nothing else seemed more important than the boy, suddenly; I had to heal him.

Soon, I found the herbs—a flower called chrysanthemum—which I gathered quickly. I returned to the village, and entering the “witch’s” house, I began preparing the chrysanthemums.

“What’s that?” the mother asked. She didn’t look like a witch, and I knew she wasn’t; it was just a rumor.

“It’s a medicine,” I explained. Then I went to the boy’s side and fed him the herbs. A day passed before the boy at last began to recover, and I felt a smile spread across my face. He would live!

“You don’t seem like a monster,” the mother said to me.

“But I am,” I replied.

She gave me a small smile. “No, you aren’t.”