Starling & Shrike

It Awaits in the Woods

Nora stepped out of the bus into the dark. She found some solace in the long night rides that public transport offered. It gave her time to think, to wonder what could have been. She looked around as the village was ending its day with the sunset. People were cleaning their porches, tending to the animals and slowly heading home. Even the free-roaming animals, like a few local stray cats, seemed to find a place to hide together with the slowly fading sun rays. Nora would not do the same. She was heading for the woods.

Missing. That's the conclusion the police came to regarding her fiancé's case. It's only been a month, and they have already concluded their search, labeling James as simply *missing*. She could still hear the police officer's words echo through her mind. Going through them over and over and over until she was sick.

"You're young and pretty. Just move on, there's no point in hanging onto a memory."

The police thought that James had simply left her, as his car, phone, documents, and some clothes were missing too. It didn't matter to them that he often left like this, so preoccupied with his research in the local woods that he forgot to inform her about his plans. Only this time he didn't come back.

"I'm telling you, he's missing! Why aren't you looking for him? It's been only a week, just try a bit harder. Please. Try harder! Bring in the dogs, comb the forest, burn it down for all I care, just find him!"

The policeman chuckled. "Ma'am, with all due respect, you're not the first one to get ghosted, just move on."

But she would not.

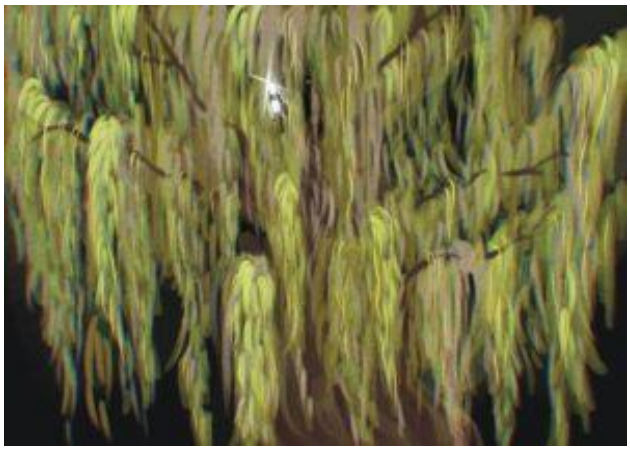
With every step, Nora was leaving civilization behind and stepping into a world unknown to her.

As she walked through the village, she noticed many roadside shrines scattered throughout the settlement. One was an image of Protestant simplicity, some were examples of Orthodox intricacy, most displayed Catholic reverence. All had been invaded. From the single Protestant cross to the Orthodox icons, the vines seemed to have taken root in all of them, as if they had always been a part of the original artwork.

Nevertheless, Nora persisted onward. The closer she got to the woods, the more these tendrils seemed to have taken over the shrines and the fewer shrines she saw. Until she arrived at the point of no return; where no chapel stood, no deity had their eyes on her. She was now in the hands and home of something unknown and ancient.

And as she traversed the unknown, she had only one thought in mind: to find him.

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Oliwia Dawidowska

As Nora was walking through the forest for what felt like hours, she let out a groan of frustration. It should have been the police doing this instead of her. What were they even being paid for? She was looking around for any hint as to where she should go when she realized she had no idea where she was. That tree she had passed by a minute ago just wasn't there. She looked around frantically, trying to find any of the landmarks she had taken note of when walking. How could she find James when she couldn't even find her way? She was about to start panicking when a reflection in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Something shiny was inside a tree hollow nearby, reflecting the dying sunlight. Could it be his glasses? She didn't know why they would be there, in a random tree, but if it wasn't a clue, at least she'd have a memento of him. Curiosity getting the better of her, she approached the tree, only to see the shine disappear down the hole. She huffed and reached into the tree.

When her hand moved into the cold unknown of the tree hollow, she did not expect much besides the item she wanted to retrieve. A leaf, a twig, a bird's nest at worst. What she did expect was an end to the tree hollow. That she did not find. Her fingers touched nothing. An ever-expanding hole greeted her hand coldly. At first, only her hand could get into the expanding hollow. Then she was up to her elbow, then it was up to her shoulder and then, finally, almost half of her body fit into the little hollow. Nora was getting annoyed; she only wanted the glasses. She wiggled her arm inside the abyss. Up, then down. Then up. Then down.

Nothing.

Her movements became erratic. Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down.

The glasses were there. He was there. No giving up now.

She balled her hand into a fist.

Down. Down. Down. Down. Down. Down.

Nora now tried to smash the tree. She just wanted to feel the damned glasses. She couldn't care less if she smashed them, made herself bleed with the broken glass. Hell,

she wouldn't even care if the glass embedded itself deep enough in her skin to require stitches. She just wanted the glasses, whole or not. Just something to know that James was once here.

Down. Down. Do—

She hit something, hit something hard. Something was there! A smile spread across her face. The thing she was touching was soft, though. Too soft to be wood, but too coarse to be any type of feather. Suddenly, *pain*.

It was sharp, unbearable, as if thousands of tiny needles penetrated her skin down to the bone. At first, Nora thought it was the glass from the item she was looking for, but the pain was relentless. She felt the weight of something that was now attached to her arm. Too heavy to be the glasses. Then she understood. Something bit her and had no intention of letting her go.

She tried to pull her hand out of the hole as hard as she could. But the never-ending abyss has now become a claustrophobic trap. It seemed to her that it had shrunk in seconds. When she tried to wiggle her arm, she was met with pain from all sides. Right, left, up or down, it seemed that there were now walls everywhere. appeared hell-bent on tearing her hand off. The thing, just like her, was thrashing around. Whereas the woman's intention was to defend herself, the thing's intention was offense. The feeling of her hand being slowly torn off was something she would never forget. She could feel her skin tearing, the joint popping out, every tendon being slowly torn and every vein being shredded to nothing else than a pile of meat. Her whole hand was now becoming exactly that: a pile of mangled meat.

Finally, Nora was able to get away. She pulled herself out with such force, she was sure her shoulder popped out. She fell over, and with that, the thing finally let go. It hurt; everything hurt. She could feel the cold, dewy grass underneath her left arm. She could not feel anything underneath her right one, anything at all, and was too scared to look at it. Well, out of sight, out of mind. However, what was not out of her sight was the critter.

It looked at her with curiosity. The creature was quite small, reaching only to her knees. It did not look ferocious. Had it not almost bitten her arm off, she would have almost called it cute. Almost. There was something wrong with its proportions. Its body was fluffy, although the forest was dark and her flashlight was nowhere to be seen, she could without a doubt say that the critter's fur was of dark coloration. It would have probably been soft to the touch once, but now it was fully matted. The copious number of different substances caked onto it did not help. She could distinguish blood everywhere around its toothy grin. Another thing she could discern were its eyes. They were beady with a shiny gloss over them, almost identical to those of a teddy bear. And just like a toy, the critter did not blink.

Suddenly the little fluffball grew. It now reached to her thighs. Long, boney legs extended from its body.

“You! Stealer! Back, back!”

It started to jump to reach the item Nora was holding; yet failed miserably. With every jump, she was sure it would topple over. She could feel a sliver of pity for the creature, but she would not give in to the feeling.

“Back! Back!”

“Why do you want it so badly?”

“Mine! Stealer! Stealer!”

“You’re the thief here! These don’t belong to you.” She held up the glasses victoriously. “These are of no value to you and of utmost value to me… why do you have them? Do you know where the owner of these is?”

“Give back! I not tell! Give back!”

“Well then, I’ll be on my way.” Nora shrugged her shoulders and slowly moved forward. A lead, no lead, what even is the difference. She had lived without leads for what felt like ages at this point; she could survive an hour or two more. Besides, the glasses themselves were enough proof that James had been nearby, perhaps still was. As she was almost out of sight of the little critter, she could hear the little paddles of its feet.

“Wait! Wait!!! You no give glasses, that…” It thought for a moment. “…okay… But if you look for owner, me can help for a price.” It paddled its large foot in anticipation.

“The price would be the glasses?” Unimpressed, she shook the shiny thing around with her unharmed hand.

“No, no, no. Not shiny glass, a favor. Favor to my chief, favor to my village. You accept?”

Nora hesitated. Even one critter already proved to be dangerous. What about the whole village of them? She could live without any hint of her fiancé’s location. But her life would be much easier with one. She tucked the glasses into the pocket of her coat.

“Show me the way then,” she said, trying to ignore the pain in her mauled hand.

The little creature happily skipped ahead, no longer seeming to care, or remember, about viciously attacking the young woman: “This way we-go! We-go! We-go!”

Under no other circumstances would she follow a creature that had almost severed her hand from the rest of her body deeper into a forest she knew nothing about. As a matter of fact, she could still feel the pain shooting up her arm from where her hand, hopefully, was. But this was different. It was not about her anymore.

They went deeper and deeper into the forest. The further they went, the older the trees got and the less familiar they looked. By the time they were about to reach the little alcove hiding the village, she could swear the trees looked like a chimera of an oak and a birch. She could hear the call of a morning dove but sung in the voice of a crow.

The village looked like something out of an old folk tale her grandmother would tell her and James often asked her to retell him. The small huts made out of things stolen from humans. Some were built from conventional materials like straw and bricks, while others were much more abstract. A whole hut was built out of car wreck remains. Another one was made of what she could only assume was stolen laundry. The most unique one was built exclusively from thousands of little human teeth.

The small beasts were running around the village, some carrying the odd pilfered trinket, their excited chatter filling the air like morning birdsong. Their settlement seemed to not have any evident roads, with the beings freely running and jumping between levels of housing, caring not whether their excited steps dislodged parts of their neighbor's roof. The only exception being the one path she was walking down now, one which the creatures must have treaded countless times through the ages of their settlement. It led deep into the center of this bizarre civilization, to what seemed like the main gathering place. As she walked deeper into this little town, many of the beings would stop to gawk at her, others ducking into the nearest open doorway in fear, while some of the braver ones walked after her. The chittering got progressively quieter the deeper she went. The critters collectively focused on her, their tiny conversations momentarily forgotten.

For the most part, the little creatures wore nothing; however, many of them had some kind of accessory, giving the otherwise practically identical beings a touch of individuality. Some accessories hinted at potential positions in their strange society, although she could only guess what those positions were. Others wore what looked like a child's attempt at making jewelry out of the shiny scraps they could find in the trash, although some of the more well-groomed ones wore real bijouterie. Perhaps the beasts had some kind of upper class. A few of the critters had leaves on their heads, styled in a crude attempt at mimicking various human hairstyles.

One stood out from the rest of the crowd, the only beast out of the myriad she saw that seemed to be sporting a human jaw as an accessory. While a few did have some kind of bone décor, this was the only one that wore explicitly human remains. She wasn't sure what to make of it, nor what it meant, but she had more pressing matters to attend to than a strange being's macabre choice of apparel.

As she approached the middle of the little village, one bigger critter stood right before her in all its glory, proudly puffing out its pompom-like chest. Towering over the other critters, a majestic moose skull adorned its head like a crown. The antlers made it thrice wider than it would have been without it. Its legs were much sturdier than those of its compatriots, no longer being akin to twigs but rather sturdy branches. It would have been quite menacing, had its height allowed it to reach higher than just below her waist.

As Nora walked up to the creature, she could hear its uneasy breath from beneath the skull. Then it spoke up, unlike the others, not in a chitter but in a booming voice.

"What need?"

“I’ve heard you can help me find someone.”

“Someone-something, anything-everything! I see-I hear-I know! But to take you must give and to give you must have. What have you?”

She looked around in her pockets with her good hand. Some tissues, a stick of gum and some old receipts. She grabbed all of it and showed it to the chief. He stared at her, unimpressed.

“Nothing you give, nothing you get.”

“The only thing of value I can offer is myself, then.”

The chief seemed to ponder her answer. Perhaps she had something to give them after all. Chitters came from the little crowd around her.

“Noisy bird!” followed by “Noise, noise, noise; bird!” and “Loud! Rid of loud!”

“I hear, I hear! Anything you will do? You kill! Kill bird, bring bird! End noise. Then, I give.”

“A bird? I’m sorry, but I can’t climb a tree in this condition.” She motioned with her head to the wounded hand still hidden in her pocket.

“That, we can fix. Will you kill bird then? Big, big, big bird. Loud, loud, loud, bird! On the tallest tree in the forest! You go, you kill, you bring, I give aid.”

She gave a stifled little chuckle, something she always did while nervous.

“If you can fix my arm, sure, I’ll help. But then you’ll help me. The man these glasses belong to. I will need to know where he is.”

“Yes, yes! We always keep promise! Thistle!”

A critter the size of a cat ran up to the chief.

“Get us herb. Best herb. And leaf, many leaf.”

The little one, Thistle, squeaked in what seemed to be agreement and skittered toward a hut made of leaves.

What the little one brought out of the hut in a little wooden bowl was the least medicine-looking mush she had ever seen in her life. It was brownish green in color and goopy in its consistency. It didn’t look like anything anyone would apply to a little scratch, much less to an open, still bleeding wound. In the other hand, it held some leaves strung together to form a makeshift bandage, something much more to her liking.

“Down tall one.”

She bent down as the chief commanded. Thistle gave him the tools and quickly skittered away, visibly afraid of her. Nora put out her hand, expecting the chief to tend to it. Instead, the chief shoved the mush right into her mouth. It tasted awful, a

combination of salty and sweet substances. As if she was eating an apple someone had already chewed, then spit out, then salted, then spit out again and then handed to her. The leaves were much more conventional; the chief just put them on her hand.

“With this weapon you kill bird.” The chief handed her a simple rock. “Good luck tall-one! Find tall tall tree, noisy bird. You kill-you bring-I tell!”

With the awful taste in her mouth, she moved forward. Her hand, bandaged with leaves, was not in pain anymore.

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Finding the “tall tall” tree was not hard, it could be clearly seen from every part of the forest. Climbing it, however, would be much more of an issue.

Nora tossed her coat aside, aiming it at the base of the tree. She would return for the garment later; it would only limit her movements now. She really hoped that the medicine would work. She could not feel her arm, but whether it was from the herbs or her actively losing the appendage was debatable.

With a final sigh and a quick prayer to the sky; Nora started to climb the tree. She had not climbed one since she was a child; even then she had not climbed one that was taller than the weeping willow behind her house. She was not good at it; frankly, she hated it then and hated it now. But it had to be done, there’s no question about it. At least the critters’ strange medicine worked, and she could use both her hands.

Branch after branch, she went higher and higher. The branches barely held her weight, but just like her, they did not give in. Halfway through the climb, she stopped and turned her gaze from the bark of the tree to the landscape of the forest.

The view was magnificent. The trees looked like an extensive blanket covering something ancient. As if a being was soundly sleeping beneath the ground. The moon was slowly beginning its journey upward, illuminating a sliver of the green blanket covering the ground. She could not hear a sound up there, only accompanied by her labored breathing. The best thing up there, however, was the smell. The air seemed as old as the forest beneath it and so pure she could not get enough of it. But there was no time for taking in the serenity. Her job had to be done; she had to climb further. Anything to find him.

Only now did she realize she was attached to the tallest tree in the forest.

With renewed power, she continued.

Nora was almost at the top when she realized she had forgotten something. She was not climbing for the sake of it, she was supposed to be looking for a bird, a loud one at that. Has she missed it? No, she would have heard it, seen it, even sensed the vibration of its drilling. But would it really be perched that high? She looked further ahead; there was nothing. No bird. The critters sent her there to fall to her death; it was a fool’s errand all along.

The exhaustion was getting to her. She realized her legs were shaking, and so were her hands. Her lightheadedness became obvious. How would she get down now? Her balance was lost and the branch she was standing on started to crack. What now?

The cracking grew louder.

What should I do?

Even louder now.

Am I doomed?

Any second now.

BANG!

The bird's presence became obvious. It had to be somewhere around there. She carefully looked around the tree, pressing her whole body against it and hugging it.

The bird was there, a woodpecker. It didn't drill into the tree like most did; instead, the sound came from it banging its head against the tree. She was not sure whether the red on its head was the red of its crest feathers.

The bird quickly turned its head around to face her. She could now see that at the place where the bird's head would meet the hard surface, there were no feathers or skin, only a skull.

As the bird continued to bash its head against the tree, she could not help but marvel at its size. Even though it was only a woodpecker; its sheer size left her with no doubt that it could carry a fox if it wanted to. As she observed the abomination, its head slowly turned in her direction. She was not the only observer anymore. It tilted its head like a curious dog, its questioning eyes almost human. They held a certain intensity, hinting at a mind beyond that of a mere animal.

Then it opened its beak.

Its beak opened wide, impossibly wide. She could now see into the seemingly never-ending void of the bird's body. Slowly, a smaller head emerged out of the creature's gaping maw. That's when it shrieked, a cacophony of two beings expressing their agony in unison, like a chorus out of sync. The sound penetrated every inch of her body.

She didn't think twice and hit it, hit it hard. As it fell, it produced a cacophony of sounds. Shrieks, coos, snaps of bone and branch. Until the symphony came to an end with a triumphant horn, the final heavy thump. The primitive tool did its job as she had done hers. The monstrosity was no more.

Now it was time to climb down. This happened faster than she would have expected. Halfway through, the delirium set in. She was so close! To the ground, to finding him. After all, her quest was not foolish but righteous. Climbing didn't seem so hard anymore

either. She could not help but imagine. Imagine both of them coming home, making dinner, reading a book and falling asleep together, just to do it all over again the next day. She yearned for nothing more than how it had been before, before James started to go to the woods, chasing the unknown. Maybe the past was not so far gone. She got distracted by these daydreams.

Her leg slipped. She lost balance. She fell.

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Nora woke up, the moon right above her. Her head was throbbing and, as she raised a hand to her head, she felt something wet. She dared not look. She wiped her hand on her pants and tried to stand up. As she did, she had to catch her balance, which was not easy as her vision doubled. Limping, she circled the tree like a crazed animal. The bird, she had to find the bird. She did. It lay there on the forest bed, both spines broken. Good. She grabbed it by its neck, shook it some and limped forward. Even now she could see her fiancé smiling before her. Urging her forward.

Wait, darling, wait. I'm coming. She smiled.

Close to the truth, she pushed herself forward, limping leg by limping leg, the dead bird swinging by her side.

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Ignoring the critters' thanks, she moved forward. She needed only the information, which she got.

The central meadow. That's where she was supposed to be headed. The critters were insistent that it was there where her fiancé lay. Through her trek to the location, her limp turned into a shuffle, the shuffle into a slow hobble, until finally the hobble turned into a crawl by the time she reached the meadow. And there he peacefully lay.

One couldn't call this a pleasant sight. While she would like to think that he was merely sleeping, lulled into a slumber by some strange creature living in this forest, and waiting to be woken up with a lover's kiss like in the fairy tales her grandma read to her; the torn flesh said otherwise. There was not even a mouth to kiss. He was missing his jaw. The denizens of the forest, supernatural or not, have already begun to tear at his remains, roots winding around them as if the forest itself was hungry. Only the hand on which he wore their engagement ring was untouched, whether by sheer happenstance or some property that made it scare off the forest creatures, she didn't know. Nor did she care.

She grabbed his cold, rigid hand and brought it to her face. Feeling his stiff palm touching her cheek, she could not help but scream. But the screech that came out of her was closer to a sound made by a wounded animal than to that of a human woman.

"May rot consume me whole, if rotting with you is our only way to eternity."