

Jane followed the measured steps of the old woman over the mossy ground. She checked her watch to determine if they would have enough sunlight to make it home, but the impermeable canopy did not seem to care what time it was. The thick boughs overhead allowed only a faint, golden glow through to where they cautiously stepped. What's more, the woods seemed to be getting thicker.

She hoped her companion would quicken her pace a bit, but old bones could only be hurried along so much. Jane reminded herself that Ms. Leopold could probably find her way home in the dark, anyway. No map, no compass, no path to follow - no problem. It's why she'd asked her for guidance in the first place.

It had taken her so long to convince this cantankerous recluse to take her on as an apprentice of sorts. Where her overgrown yard and ramshackle home (held together by increasingly strange odds and ends) had kept most of their other neighbors at a distance, Jane had been undeterred. That, and Ms. Leopold's frequent and lengthy excursions into the woods made her all the more intriguing. Jane had wanted to learn from her, where others had only passed judgment for her intensity. She'd attempted to follow her, on many occasions, and it was only today she'd finally secured an actual invitation. Expertise in the wilderness was hard to find these days, and Jane intended to make use of her seemingly endless knowledge.

Besides, her essay for her botany degree application was practically writing itself, "The Lost Art of Foraging - by Jane Lowman." Jane focused on the thrill of being off-trail, and started silently dictating possible introductory paragraphs to herself as they walked.

Suddenly, the old woman stopped. Jane nearly dropped their bucket of mushrooms in her effort to keep from bumping into Ms. Leopold. She watched as the old woman shifted her weight to lean heavily on her walking stick. She then lifted her chin, and yelled into the trees, "This is Jane."

Jane scanned the horizon before she cocked an eyebrow, wondering what eccentricity the old woman had up her sleeve now. With no one else here to play the "crazy old lady" card for, it seemed like wasted theatrics. She'd thought Ms. Leopold would have given up trying to scare her off by now. She waited a moment, before she parted her smiling lips to ask what she was up to.

"Child!" a creaking voice rang out in slow, drawn-out anger.

Jane dropped her bucket in surprise, and spun around. No one else was there.

"Is she a child?" Another voice, higher and breathy like the wind, asked the first, "She seems grown."

"In body, yes. But remember, it takes this kind awhile for their brains to mature. And they seem to struggle to communicate without them." A third voice, deep and earthy, responded.

Jane continued her frenzied search for the source of the voices, but around her there was nothing. Nothing but darkness and the woods. "Who is that?" she whispered at Ms. Leopold.

When Ms. Leopold didn't answer, she reached a trembling hand towards her elderly companion. But as her fingertips brushed the edge of her frail hand, the old woman quickly yanked it back out of reach.

"This is Jane," she repeated, unfazed, into the twilight, "she's here to take my spot with the Council."

There was a pause, and a deep silence. Even the normal sounds of the forest were

quieted. The breath seemed to have left Jane's lungs, so she couldn't vocalize her many questions. *What's happening? Where have you brought me? What council?*

Jane was frozen in her fear, but the old woman was defiant and stoic in her stillness. "I am done. As I said last time you called for me. Jane is as good as any of us are. She'll represent us well."

There was movement in the darkness, a shifting of boughs and tree limbs, and it seemed as though the entire forest were closing in on Jane. Again she tried to creep closer to the old woman, hoping for some comfort. Doubting her intentions now seemed like a privilege reserved for someone not surrounded by disembodied voices in the forest.

"You have not served your time as spokesbeing." The third voice groaned.

Jane realized that the voice was as much inside her head as her own thoughts. She crouched and covered, and started to back away from the old woman. She tripped over the roots of a tree, and steadied herself on the rough bark before she turned to run. But the twigs caught her hair, and as she fought to detangle herself, the grip of the twigs seemed to tighten. She felt herself pulled towards the gnarled bark of the tree, which was slowly shifting. It began to resemble a face, and that face was now level with her own.

"I grow more tired of your kind with every encounter," creaked the tree that held her hair and glared into her eyes. Its branches seemed to morph into arms; its trunk - a thick torso.

Jane's eyes widened in horror. A scream finally escaped her lips as she struggled free, and fell back at the feet of the old woman.

It was now that Ms. Leopold offered her hand, "It's alright, kid. They won't hurt you. Not today, anyway."

Jane weighed her options briefly before she accepted the help to her feet. She stood, surveying the crowd of beings that now surrounded them. The forest had eyes that, despite their hollow appearance, were all clearly fixed on the two humans at the center. Their forms seemed to waiver in the failing light, as it was unclear if she was looking at hair or leaves, boughs or limbs. Their parts were both and neither, all at once. "What are they?" she whispered to the old woman.

"We've called them nymphs," she responded slowly, in a voice that seemed tired, "Dryads. *Waldfrau*. *Kodama*. *Ghillie Dhu*. *Yakshinis*. *Spriggan*. Greenman. It all depends on when and where we've met with them."

"Tree spirits?" Jane asked.

"Just trees. The names are what we've given them when they choose to speak."

"How?" Jane breathed.

"In the past, we called it 'magic.' If we're lucky enough to see the future, we might know it as 'science.' I had an infectious mycorrhizal fungi theory, - but it's hard to find collaborators on that kind of research. 'I hear trees' and all that, gets you laughed out of any labs pretty quick. Anyway, for now... it just is."

Jane looked deeply into the old woman's crinkled eyes for more answers. They seemed to waiver between concern and sympathy, before they hardened into resolve.

"Right," she said, and then lifted her head to address the trees once more, "You've been introduced. She's taking my spot. And I'm done."

She shifted her stick from under the crook of her arm and used it to start to walk. She was pulling away from Jane's frantic grasps at her hands and clothes, when a gigantic tree swung low branches into her path. "You've not served your time," it boomed.

Suddenly, the old woman straightened herself and stood with her arms outstretched. The walking stick seemed like a weapon in her grasp, now. It was clenched in the flash of bone and tendon of her shaking fist. "If you need my death to make my 'end of service' here official, you can have it." The old woman bellowed with a fury that echoed through the forest.

She glared defiantly at each of the trees, holding their stares, as if waiting for one of them to take her up on her offer. When none moved, she looked back at Jane - a terrified animal, paralyzed in the decision of whether to fight or flee. "You'll be alright," she repeated softly, and then turned to pass the stilled tree.

All at once, Jane's senses returned to her and she nearly fell again, scrambling after Ms. Leopold. Terrifying old woman or not, she thought to herself, she would not be left alone with... with these *monsters!*

The creaking tree spoke with slow rage, "We appear to you with two arms, two eyes, a nose and a mouth, and even then, we are not *human* enough for you to respect us."

She watched as the path the old lady had taken seemed to disappear with her, as the trees had shifted once more. She was alone in the middle of them. "*Monsters?!*" the creaking continued, "Really. It's no wonder the Council needed to be called again, after all this time. Your disdain for life is appalling."

Jane turned slowly. Had she said "monsters" out loud?

"We communicate as we must," the tree that had blocked Ms. Leopold's way said slowly, as if to answer her silent question. It gestured to the angry, creaking tree that had chastised her, "as they said, we appear to you with mouths because we imagine it's a comfort. Humans are not the only creatures who struggle to serve on the Council. We find that a bit of familiarity helps to speed things along for our chosen spokesbeings."

Perhaps it was because these things truly believed that the way they stood in front of her could be considered somehow *familiar* or *comforting*. Or the fact that a conversation being conducted at the achingly slow gait of trees was actually an attempt to *speed things along*. Or perhaps it was just the natural result of being abandoned in the forest by her quirky-older-next-door-neighbor turned foraging-teacher turned lunatic-challenging-otherworldly-beings-to-try-and-kill-her... regardless of the why, Jane snapped. She started to laugh. The laughter gave way to tears. And then she made a sound that was somewhere in between; a haunted howl that belonged only to mankind.

When she finally ran out of steam, she looked around her and took in the faces of the Council. Despite her terror, her brain seemed to be forcing all the knowledge she'd ever read about the trees - which, admittedly, nothing had yet covered what to do when they turned hostile - to the forefront of her consciousness. She started to recognize them.

The one that had grasped her hair, and by all counts seemed to hate her, was a walnut tree - which, as soon as she'd thought the word, "walnut", it had hurled one in her direction, leaving a small dent in the soil next to her feet as she side-stepped out of the way. There was a cedar, and a pine, both with bristly boughs forming beards over their gentle faces. There was a river birch, and a sycamore, their skin mottled with freckles? Birth-marks? More trees still were in the background, not completely visible, but Jane felt their presence. Her eyes then fell on an

oak, distinct in their crown of pointed leaves and acorn clusters. As she examined the oak's face more closely, she saw the words "Big T + E.S." carved inside a lopsided heart, where their right eye should be. About three feet of barbed wire protruded from their side, just below what could have been a ribcage - their trunk having grown around it, encapsulating it. She felt a pang of embarrassment and sadness.

"Who did that to you?" she asked, quietly.

"Well, it wasn't the Squirrels," snapped Walnut.

Oak smiled gently, and then asked, "Shall we begin?"

"I still don't know why I'm here," confessed Jane.

"A bit of history, then, perhaps?" Oak looked at her kindly, "fortunately for you, trees are excellent historians."

"Are we really going to let them break the Council this way? A new speaker, before the old has died," bellowed Walnut, angrily.

"Very unorthodox," Cedar mumbled through his bushy beard.

"And a waste of time! Having to reacquaint a new speaker for the humans with the Council's business *already*," River Birch agreed in slow raspy breaths.

"If we can accommodate Speaker Fruit Fly, I think we can manage this," said another tree from the back.

Jane looked at Oak, and nodded. Walnut chucked another green, round nut half-heartedly in her direction.

"In a time before our most Ancient Ones' first rings," Oak began ceremoniously, and suddenly the other trees were speaking in a unified, choral voice, "there were the Sun-Eaters."

"We had the Earth to ourselves," spoke Sycamore, softly like the wind.

"No beings to consume us," another voice picked up behind Jane.

"None to burrow in our skin."

"Or tap into the sweetness of our roots."

"None to desecrate our dead, or harvest our children."

"We pulled nutrients from the Earth without challenge or check," the voices dropped off and picked up all around Jane, giving her the sensation of being inside a storm.

"The Earth cooled, as we kept more and more for ourselves. Our hunger was limitless."

"The Earth cooled... are you talking about an Ice Age?" Jane asked, processing their story slowly.

"Ice," the trees agreed.

"It crept over us. Killed the first Sun-Eaters. Nearly killed *everything*."

"And we vowed, never again," said Oak, solemnly.

"Never again," the rest of the trees echoed.

"Once we recovered, the Council was formed. We knew we couldn't only serve our own hungers and expect to survive."

"We gave fruits to other beings. Sacrificed our children, so that theirs might grow."

"We gave our boughs as shelter."

"We allowed our dead to be consumed, to be returned to the Earth - accepting the cycle as it was meant to be. Designed to be."

"We fed and fostered those that could breathe in our breaths. And for eons, when those beings died, they fed us in turn."

*The Council* - by Laura McCall

“We’ve lived in balance.”

Walnut brought their dark and furious face back in front of Jane’s, and growled in a low breath, “until now.”

“The Council was called back to service when we noticed the balance had been thrown off, once more,” Oak explained gently.

“Humans,” Jane exhaled, suddenly understanding.

“Humans,” answered the trees.

“You are here to stand trial for all of Mankind,” Oak announced authoritatively.

“All of Mankind? I’m... I’m a kid! Like you said. I want to learn! I mean, I’m trying! Right? I recycle! And I’m a vegan for crying out loud!” she remembered her audience, “I mean, I guess you don’t really see it as a selling point if I only eat plants. But...”

“All must consume to live,” Pine said dismissively, “but your hunger knows no limits.”

“We seek balance,” the other trees agreed.

“And we are determining your place in it.”

Jane stood, panic continuing to build.

“This season, we call on the testimony of Rat,” Oak called out abruptly.

Suddenly, there was a shimmer through the trees. Their humanoid forms shuddered, and for an instant, their exposed roots looked like long tails, their leaves and twigs like fur and whiskers. All at once, they were nymph and animalian. Tree and other.

“Welcome, Speaker Rat,” squeaked - groaned - spoke Oak, “when you are ready, we are here to witness your account of Mankind.”