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About 1,000 words

THE WITCH'S CHILDREN

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The mist tastes of sage and monkshood on the day light glows from the house in the forest for the first time in over a century.

Brenn snorts warm methane, clearing a path through the mist toward candlelit windows. A woman moves about inside, setting bowls in front of two human fledglings. *A family*, Brenn thinks. Her tongue flicks out, cataloging the new aromas in the forest.

In *her* forest.

Sage, monkshood, and something distinctly *more*. Like the first whip of lightning in a summer storm, it sits heavy on her tongue—magic.

Witches.

Brenn rears back, tousling the trees her hindquarters are wedged between. She hunkers lower. Scales shift to black, blending into the night.

Unaware of their voyeur, the witch pulls bread from a basket and hands it to the fledglings, who accept it with chubby fingers and food-smearred smiles.

Feral, Brenn thinks and cleans her muzzle, as if the fledglings will absorb some of her propriety through mere proximity. They don't, of course. And she thinks of this, of the new smells messing up her forest and ways to get them *out*, as she turns and sinks into darkness, unaware of the witch's lips that curve into a smile behind her mug of tea.

#

The ninth day since the humans invaded her forest breaks with the off-pitch caw of a rooster echoing through the trees.

The witches have a rooster.

A loud, horrible rooster that Brenn imagines toasting. Perhaps tonight—when the witch and her fledglings are curled in their beds instead of stomping around her forest, disturbing her sleep—perhaps then, she will sneak into their chicken coop and eat that horrid bird.

Brenn grumbles, and nuzzles beneath the leather of her wing, sniffing a blue speckled egg. Her tongue lathes against its bumpy exterior, grooming it until it shines in the dim cave.

I'm sorry.

She counts its speckles over and over, until heavy eyes drift closed, dreaming of fire and fear, and an egg that'll never hatch.

#

Brenn's groggy when she wakes, mind still muddled with nightmares, when something shifts along the ridge of her back. *What the...* A tiny squeal has her ear flicking up faster than

she can blink, and she swivels, tucking her egg behind her. Scales shift from azure to amber as methane builds in Brenn's jowls, ready for quick release.

Two shaggy heads pop out from beneath her belly, and for a moment Brenn is too stunned to move as the witch's fledglings poke at her, giggling. She rears back, a growl reverberating low in her throat. The smaller fledgling stops and cocks its head to the side, a mop of unruly brown curls tumbling along with the motion, and Brenn's growl cuts out.

"Dragon," the whelp chirps, and it stumbles toward her, making grabby hands at her belly.

Horrified, Brenn shifts to back up before she remembers her egg and stills, eyes darting to the fledgling as it latches to her left talon. The larger fledgling laughs and joins in.

Stop it, Brenn thinks at the children.

They freeze, looking at each other.

"Did you hear that too, Shilo?" the larger one asks.

"Uh-huh," the whelp replies. "Dragon, speak?"

Brenn huffs, a sliver of pride warming her belly at the wonder in their eyes. *Yes, I speak. Let go of me,* she thinks toward them.

"Ooohhh!" the fledglings coo in unison. The larger one laughs and dances, while Shilo climbs up Brenn's leg.

#

Shilo and his sister, Arvid, return the following day, and each day after until Brenn gives up trying to shoo them away.

To satisfy their curiosity so they'll leave, she tells herself.

They never do.

#

It's been almost a year when the witch comes to her den. Arvid is adding daisies to a ring on Brenn's head, while Shilo squishes berries into her tail.

"Well, this is adorable," a butter-smooth voice says.

Brenn's head cracks around to the cave entrance.

Shilo squeals and toddles over to the witch, who scoops him up, kissing the top of his head. Brenn ruffles, fighting the urge to hiss and shoo the witch away from *her* fledglings. *Oh*. Her cheeks warm at the thought, scales shifting to crimson.

"Red," Arvid chirps, clapping.

"I'd like to express my thanks," the witch says, looking at Brenn.

She snorts. *Witches cannot be trusted.*

The witch frowns. "Not all, perhaps. But I can produce a spell to ward your cave or help your food grow."

Brenn baffles at the thought.

"Or, I hear you have an egg. I could cast protection—"

No, Brenn thinks at the witch, louder than she meant.

The witch pauses. "It's safe—"

Don't touch it. It's dead. Brenn shakes, hunkering low. *A witch...*

The witch's eyes grow wide. She sets Shilo down. "A witch cast a spell on it?"
Something electric crackles from her fingers. "Show me. Perhaps, the spell can be removed."

Brenn snorts a puff of methane.

"Please. You've helped my children," she says, eyes soft. "Their father passed before we moved here. I wanted to give them a fresh start, but they weren't happy. Not until they met you."

#

The fledglings sprawl about while the witch smears crushed herbs on top of the egg, muttering nonsense. Brenn watches, tongue flicking at the mess.

Feral, she thinks, and the witch grins.

When she's finished, the egg sits still as ever, but now with goo mucking up its blue speckles.

"Give it time," the witch says and leads her children out of the cave.

Brenn licks her muzzle. *Thank you.*

The sun's just beginning its descent behind the trees when she curls her tail around her goo-laden egg. She resists the urge to clean it and instead envisions a small, blue hatchling.

If only, she thinks. But at least she has Shilo and Arvid.

She enfolds the egg beneath her wing, letting her eyelids close.

Then, as a small ray of sun sneaks into the cave, then... the egg shifts.

End