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THE GLADE AND THE GROVE

Mallory Fitzpatrick

There is a forest, and in the middle of the forest, there is a glade ringed by laurel trees.

In the middle of the glade there is a statue.

No one knows how she got there, but she has been there for a long time.

Not many have seen her for themselves, but there are whispers.

They say she is made of white marble, cold and beautiful, and so lifelike you expect her chest to rise and fall. They say she has a certain magnetism. But you can only find her if you aren't looking. They say she was not always a statue, that she was a woman once. But something happened, something terrible and forgotten now.

These are the stories the old ones tell at night around the fire, when the wind howls and the trees rustle. They know that the forest is full of dangerous things.

But the young ones are not afraid of the forest. They are wild and free from fear and they know that the forest is full of wondrous things.

And there is one thing everyone knows about the forest. It has only one rule, but that rule must be obeyed above all else: Do not take without permission. Ever.

The old ones remember what it is to be young and fearless and brimming with life, so they do not protest when their children and grandchildren go out to spend nights in the woods. There is no stopping these revels; the woods too have a certain magnetism. So they leave the young ones to their carousing, but whisper the rule into their ears at night, repeating it over and over.

Do not take without permission. This is the rule of the forest.

One night when the moon is full and the air is warm and it smells musty, like damp earth and secrets, they go to the forest.

They bring wine and laughter, and leave their worries at the edge of the woods. They flit between the trees, singing and dancing and drinking, pouring wine into the ground every now and then so that the forest might partake too. In return, it whispers to them, reminding them to enjoy, but to be careful. It tells them to remember the rule.

They drift apart in twos and threes, losing each other in the trees but never straying too far.

In one dense grove, a boy follows a girl into the shadows, wanting something more. He reaches for her, but she steps back. She wants nothing more.

But he reaches again, grasping at the shadows. She retreats farther, shaking her head.

“Don’t.” She whispers. But he keeps coming, so she begins to run.

She races through the trees, her feet flying, her hair streaming. Moonlight and shadow paint strange patterns on her skin as she runs.

And he chases her. He is desperate to catch her, for the taste of her, and he can think of nothing else.

She is a ghost, flickering in and out of sight beneath the trees, but he is close, so close.

He reaches out for her, and for a second he can feel her shawl in his hand.

But then his fingers close on empty air and he stumbles into an open space, coming to a halt.

He is in a glade, ringed by laurel trees.

He is bewildered, furious, disbelieving. Where has she gone? He was right behind her. But this glade is empty.

And then he sees it isn't.

There, in the middle of the glade, is a statue of white marble.

He forgets all about the girl he was chasing as he approaches the statue, entranced.

She is beautiful. Her hair tumbles down past her shoulders, curls so delicate they should be soft to touch. She is draped in fabric that should be satin-smooth, clinging to body. One hand rests on her chest, clutching her garment, holding it up. The other extends outward, reaching for him.

He walks forward slowly, mesmerized by her hypnotic gaze. He takes the outstretched hand and shivers, startled to find cold marble instead of warm flesh. He stares up into her face.

He wants her more than he has ever wanted anything. He cannot think about anything else, only this pounding desire, this need to touch her, hold her, have her.

Her head is tilted downward; on her pedestal she is taller than him. He tips his head back and he has never seen anything so beautiful.

Her skin is smooth and her lips are full. She is smiling just a little.

He leans forward.

Don't. The forest whispers, and he hesitates. *Remember the rule.*

The rule, yes, there is a rule. The forest only has one rule. But he cannot think about the rule. He does not care what the forest wants. He can only think about her, and she is so lovely, and he has already ignored the forest's rule once tonight.

And so he presses his soft, human lips to her cold, marble ones, expecting her to come to life at his kiss.

But she doesn't.

He steps back, surprised and unnerved. When he looks into her face again, something has changed. She is as beautiful as before. But her smile is different, darkly amused, and her eyes are colder.

Remember the rule.

He stumbles backwards, unsettled, unable to take his eyes off the statue until he trips and falls. When he gets back to his feet, the glade is gone, there is no statue, and the trees surround him once more.

Feeling like someone in a dream, he starts walking again, hoping to find the girl.

She has long since found her way back to the others, secure in the company of her friends and the forest.

But he is lost and he begins to run.

And then something strange begins to happen.

His steps are slowing, his feet becoming heavier. His limbs are growing stiff. He opens his mouth to shout, but he cannot. The transformation is complete.

There is a forest, and in the middle of the forest there is a grove of blackthorn trees.

In the middle of the grove there is a statue.

No one knows how he got there, but he will be for a long time.