

Witchwood

A young witch wanders through a dark forest, lost and alone. She limps as she walks, clutching onto her arm as a small ball of light emanates from her free hand. The soft glow helped her sight ever so slightly, but it was not enough to sedate her fears. The canopy of the forest smothered the slivers of moonlight attempting to pass through. Sounds of the unknown, like creaks and chitters, were amplified in the near darkness. The only comfort the witch had was the weak radiance in her palm, but even that threatened to flicker out. With a shiver down her spine, she forced herself to continue onward toward the mysteries of the night.

Alright, Dorothy, calm down. Just because you're lost and hurt in a random forest in the middle of the night doesn't mean you're going to die here... R-Right? The witch felt herself stiffen up upon the thought's entry. Her anxieties were taking hold, and she tried her hardest to push them aside as she traversed through the dark. *N-No, I'm not going to die here. Nobody's going to die here. I-I mean, an injured witch doesn't always mean bad, right? Just because a lot of people want us dead doesn't mean I'll die too. Even if I do, I-I'll be left to rot in this spooky forest that no one probably knows about, and if someone actually does find me, they'll think, "Serves you right, you terrible, horrible, good-for-nothing-"*

Suddenly, a loud noise kicked Dorothy out of her train of thought and caused her to flinch. She stopped in her tracks, freezing herself to the spot. *W-Who's there?* She dared not to move, instead frantically shifting her eyes in every direction to look at the limited area around her. *C-Come on, Dorothy, it's okay. N-Nothing's out there to get yo-*

The sound appeared again, louder this time, and the witch instantly ducked for cover. She kneeled down to the ground, her ball of light barely a small flame within her defensive state. She cowered in fear, accepting her soon-to-be untimely demise until the screech took on another

form. Instead of frightful, the cry morphed into a call, and ultimately, transformed into nothing more than a hoot. It was only then when Dorothy untensed herself. She got up, brightened her magical glow, and peered around the forest, spotting its source resting atop a tree branch.

Oh, she realized, it's just an owl.

The bird turned its head to meet Dorothy's gaze, letting out one last hoot once it did. It then looked away and flew into the darkness, never to be seen again. *S-See? It was nothing but an owl. N-Nothing's trying to get you in this creepy place...*

However, as she watched the owl disappear, something strange caught Dorothy's eye. She saw but a mere glimpse of it, but the witch found herself shivering in distress once again. *Something is out there, and it's trying to get you.* Her breathing quickened, her heartbeat pulsed in her chest, and she suppressed a gulp of fear as she slowly moved her gaze upward. Dorothy's hand trembled, the faint glow in her palm quivering as it inched closer to the canopy.

Please don't hurt me...

Once it finally reached the treetops, the witch was met with an alarming sight: A woman's face was looking directly at her. The rest of her appearance was shadowed by the dark foliage, but her pair of eyes stared straight into Dorothy's own. *Eep!* On instinct, the witch jumped in terror, staggering a few steps backward before tripping to the ground. The sudden fall caused her only source of light to disappear, leaving her in the bare moonlight. She winced in pain as she landed on her injuries, but being hurt would not matter to what she would become. As she shook more than ever, Dorothy quickly clutched herself together, her vain attempt to protect herself from whatever monster was before her.

I lost. I'm hurt. I'm going to die. I don't want to die...

"P-Please don't hurt m-me..."

Those were the last words the witch whimpered before focusing on holding herself together. Every nerve in her body was engulfed by fear and fright. She could barely choke out her muted cries for help. All was overwhelming, and she stayed within her shield, not wanting to face her inescapable doom.

However, Dorothy's fate had other plans. While keeping herself safe the best she could, she nearly missed the sound of a gasp coming out of the woman's mouth.

"You're a witch," she said, "and a young one, at that."

The thought of heading straight into her demise tormented Dorothy, but one element about the voice caught her attention. *W-Why does she care about me being a w-witch? She could kill me right here, right now, but... She's not doing anything.*

Pondering about the confusing thought in her mind, she decided to give the woman a chance. She slowly unraveled her defenses, beginning with taking a small peek at the face above. From there, Dorothy's intrigue only grew. A vivid ball of light rested in a hand sprouted from the leaves. It lit the scene brighter than her own magic ever could, and the details behind the woman's face were now clear. Widened eyes stared at the fallen witch. Her expression appeared surprised and concerned, and it was as if she took pity on the poor being below.

At this moment, Dorothy was unsure what to do. *I... I can't trust this lady that easily. I've been through something like this in the past before. People like her put up ruses and facades to fool me, then end up beating me for who I am.* She paused her thoughts to take in the woman's face. She stayed in the canopy, waiting for Dorothy to make her move. *I've... I've been through enough of this to know what happens next. It was only time until I became too vulnerable for my own good.*

"Y-Yeah," she finally said, "I'm a witch. Just get it over with and k-kill me already."

"Kill you? Oh, good heavens, no! I'd rather do the exact opposite!"

What? The woman's exclamation caught Dorothy off guard. She failed to understand what she meant until a mysterious force began to flow through her. Dorothy looked up to see the light now hovering in the air. Instead of holding it, the woman's hand aimed its open palm toward the witch, a pale green glow emanating from it. All of a sudden, her wounds began to disappear. Her leg no longer felt pain, as did her arm. Blood and bone magically worked together to tend to what was hurt, and soon enough, Dorothy was as good as new. She arose from her position, feeling in disbelief when she was successfully able to get on her feet.

My injuries are gone...

"You... You healed me," Dorothy stated, moving her head up to look at the woman. *She really healed me.*

"Of course."

"Why?"

"It pains me to see a witch in distress of any kind. That is why I would like to invite you to somewhere safe."

The woman's hand extended from the foliage, now low enough for Dorothy to grab on to. As tempted as she was to accept her offer, she hesitated. *This random lady is someone I met in a dark forest in the middle of the night... But she chose to heal me, a witch.* "H-How do I know I can trust you?"

"Do not worry, young one. I would not bring any harm to you." Then, with a simple wave of her hand, the woman cast another spell. Before she knew it, Dorothy found herself slowly levitating off the ground. She wobbled at first, using her arms to regain her balance, and looked at the woman. With a smile on her face, she then revealed her secret:

"After all, I am a witch too."

Another witch? This lady is a witch too? How is that possible? Despite the quantity of questions entering Dorothy's mind, she was not able to ask them. The woman's face and arm disappeared into the canopy, and Dorothy's body did the same. Heading straight up, she used her arms to block leaves and branches as she passed through them. It would not take long to exit the vegetation, and once she did, she opened her eyes to a magnificent sight. The forest stretched as far as the eye could see, seemingly infinite and endless. Up above, a vast sea of stars decorated the night sky, the moon glowing brightly as an additional touch.

Wow... It's like an entirely different part of the world, Dorothy thought to herself.

Everything's empty and away from dangers. There's nothing but peace up here...

Enamored by the view, Dorothy's trance was broken when the sound of rustling caught her attention. She swiveled her head to be greeted with the same woman from before, this time with the rest of her true form. She was clad in a long, dark gray robe, with white trimmings to enhance her attire. One of her hands contained a radiant shine, while the other performed but a small wave. Both the woman and Dorothy were lowered atop the forest's crown, the two now magically standing above it.

"I must apologize for my first impression," said the woman. "I was simply surprised to encounter a fellow witch. My name is Mother Glory. Tell me, what is yours, young one?"

Mother Glory? My name? "Erm... D-Dorothy," she stammered with a hint of hesitation. "My name is Dorothy."

"It is very nice to meet you, Dorothy. I would like to introduce you to Witchwood." Mother Glory sent a friendly smile her way, then gestured to the land beyond. "It is a place by witches, for witches, of witches."

"Is that what you meant by being a witch yourself? How come I've never heard of Witchwood? What is it like?"

Before Dorothy released all of her thoughts on her mind, Mother Glory silenced her with the raise of her palm. "I have the answers to all of your questions, young Dorothy. Witchwood is a secretive place, guarded by magic and known by only a few to ensure our safety. Surely you know of witch-hunts and their attempts to decimate our kind?"

Witch-hunts... The moment the word appeared, the memory struck Dorothy. Screams, flames, and the urge to survive - She needed to shake her head to return to the present. "Y-Yes, I know what witch-hunts are... I was a victim of one."

The mood suddenly became solemn, and a small moment would pass before Mother Glory spoke. "Dorothy, if recalling the memory does not disturb you too much... May you please explain what happened? I completely understand if you do not want to."

I'd be sharing my story with someone I just met tonight, but... Mother Glory is a witch just like me. I've never met another witch on my travels before. Plus, she was kind enough to heal me from... I think I can start trusting her now. Heaving out a heavy sigh, Dorothy nodded to Mother Glory, her agreement to tell her tale.

"I remember being with my family at the time," she began. "We were living peacefully at our house when they ambushed us. They set it on fire while they took my mother, my father, and my two siblings. I was the only one who managed to flee." Dorothy paused, taking a moment to allow the trauma to properly weigh atop her heart, then continued. "I remember the look of sheer horror on Mother's face as they came for us. She told me to run away as fast and as far as I could. I wanted to try and help.. but I couldn't. Ever since then, I've been taking care of myself as a loner. I've been through less... *horrific* incidents, but... The rest is history."

Mother Glory looked at Dorothy with a gaze filled to the brim with care and concern.

"Dorothy, I cannot thank you enough for revealing your story to me. A witch as young as you should not have deserved such a fate. It is truly terrible how people will treat our kind this way."

"It is!" Dorothy emphasized. "They discriminate against us simply because we stray away from the norm! Just because witches use different types of magic doesn't mean we're demons who need to die! I really wish there was proper justice, but... There's nothing a witch like me can do anything about that..."

Dorothy's heart sunk in her chest, but the moment she noticed Mother Glory's open arms, she knew what she was trying to say. She approached the woman and hugged her, the comfort almost overwhelming when the hug was returned. *Thank you*, Dorothy wanted to say. *Thank you for being here for me when nobody else wanted to.*

"Dorothy, I promise you, a witch is always able to make a difference." Mother Glory's tone was as soft as cotton as she soothed her. "Although I will never experience what you have been through. my beginnings can relate with yours. I was an only child who had lost my parents when I was younger. I have persevered through so much, just like you have, and now I am the leader of Witchwood."

"Really?"

Mother Glory nodded. "I do not want my kind to suffer for who they are. That is why Witchwood is a safe haven where witches are able to feel protected. Our community is a sanctuary where many others accept you for who you are. There is no fear or backlash for being a witch. That is why I am wondering if you would like to join us, young Dorothy."

"What?" Dorothy pulled away from the hug in surprise. "You want me to join Witchwood?"

"Only if you wish to. I understand you have your own freedom, so if you decide not to join-"

"N-No, no," Dorothy cut off. *This... was the blessing I needed in my life.* "I'd love to join Witchwood, Mother Glory. Thank you." With a grateful gaze and a smile full of gratitude, Dorothy hugged her once more with as much appreciation as she could muster.

"No, Dorothy, thank *you*," Mother Glory said while hugging back, "Anything for a fellow witch."