

The Witch and the Centaur

A clammy grey mist swirled around the moss-coated trunks fencing the lonely path that wound its way around their great bases. Damp from yesterday's rain and the morning fog, the muddy track grasped at any unwary foot which slogged along it.

Struggling up the steep trail appeared the ghostly figure of a woman. The dim predawn light under the dense canopy blurred her form while smoke-like wisp's of fog shrouded her in a grim wedding veil. The still air of the forest muffled the sounds of her gasping and steps as if the sleeping giants around her wanted nothing to disturb their tranquility.

As she rounds a bend, her features become more distinct, her wrap thinning away with her march. More about her can now be understood to the watchful eye.

Her muddy clothes are patched and frayed, the ends splotched with coverings of old and new mud. Her bony, gnarled fingers grasp a carved wooden staff whose small figurine atop is the color of blood. Around her thin neck a delicate golden necklace hangs, clasping a broad knotted cross with a round cross peg placed in the middle, seemingly carved from wood. Long tresses of once brown hair cascade around her heart-shaped face, the white only lightly streaked now. Her eyes were filmed, obscuring the deep green of her irises while a full mouth smiles at seemingly at nothing as she toils.

The sound of hoof striking rock gives the old woman pause, and she squints ahead, trying to see. All that reaches her is a large shapeless blur.

"Mistress, are you well?" came a lilting alto. A smile bloomed further on the old woman's withered features.

"Very well, Grace." She cackled. "This mountain has yet to beat me!" A breeze rustled a nearby bush and stirred the air, as if protesting such a boast.

"Well mistress, I have arm bread laid on your table and a glass of cold stream water sitting next to it. If you would like to sample them while one is still hot and the other cool, perhaps you will allow me to carry you the rest of the way?" she asked tentatively.

“You’re getting a bit uppity for you centaurian hide. Assuming I’m all a helpless old lady.” Grace’s voice immediately rose in protest, until soft laughter cut her short.

“I’m teasing you Grace.” The old woman soothed. “A ride back to the house would be lovely.”

The young centaur walked up to the old woman and presented her flank, exposing the western saddle. Any observer who happened upon the scene would be struck by the utter lack of similarities between the two, and the tender devotion bestowed on the crotchety lady by the younger woman.

The upper body of Grace was that of a slender, slightly gawky teen. Long blonde hair swirled fetchingly around her slim shoulders. Her pert breasts rode proudly on her chest, swaying slightly with each step she took. A pixie face dusted with freckles enhanced her startling blue eyes that shone behind thick lashes.

Her lower body was that of a mustang, tough and fast. A throwback nearly to the original conquistadorian stock brought to America by Cortez himself, her lines were clean. A golden coat seemed to catch the limited light and reflect it in a golden halo around her. Her tail, cut short of the ground by a good six inches, was the same color as her hair.

The pair started back up the trail, the centaur alert and treading carefully while the old woman swayed slightly on her perch. Mud squelched under Grace’s hooves, leaving the faintest trace of distaste on her face. No bird sang, no breeze stirred the skeletal branches of the bushes around them. They seemed completely alone.

Breaking into silence, the old woman began croaking in a horrendous cacophony of screeches, wails, hacks and trillings. Grace’s horse-like ears on top her head swiveled around to listen politely as her passenger abused the silence around them with her song.

*My bonny lad traveled the ocean
My bonny lad traveled the sea
My bonny lad drank up my potion
Now he’ll never leave the sea!*

*His arms are now long and rub’bry
His legs are just ‘bout the same!*

*His manner is lousy and grump'ery
But he'll never give me the same!*

The screeches went on for several more verses, each more horrible than the last. By the end of the song, her bonny lad had lost his shape, his riches, his friends, and his mind. The woman's voice fell mercifully silent except for a slight wheeze as she caught her breath.

"That was wonderful mistress." Grace congratulated. It sounded like she meant it, and no fool would ever miss the earnestness in her voice and eyes.

"Thank you dearie." The old woman cackled. "Now, how about you take over for a bit and let me rest my old pipes."

"As you wish." Grace murmured. She thought for a minute or two about what song she would like to sing that could meet her mistress's composition. Her lips parted and she took a gentle breath. After the horrible noises before, Grace's voice broke like the dawn over the mountains after a long winter's night. An unparalleled beauty wrapped in music and sent skyward in pure delight. The cries of creatures roused before fell quiet, this time by choice, and the trees themselves seemed to lean in to listen. Grace's melody filled the forest:

*The green forest grows with life
The blue seas roar and smash
The mountains glow with white of strife
The cavern's gloam the shade of ash*

*We are all connected, we are all one
In day we see, in night we dream
Our lives we live till life is done
This great dance we do as a team*

More followed, much more, praising the creatures and green world of land, sky and sea. The notes seemed to vibrate on the air, echoing around them and through them. The sky brightened and a ray of sun struck the land close by, illuminating them with its warm light. She fell quiet after a while, the last notes hanging in the forest as if caught on their branches.

Her flanks heaved from her effort, and she struggled to maintain her pace in the thick mud. She nearly bolted when a hand lightly slapped her flank.

“Excellent as always Grace. Keep it up, and someday you’ll sound as good as me!”

“We can only hope mistress.” Grace demurred.

A bellowing roar accompanied by snaps and pops like a box of Chinese fireworks going off all at once announced the arrival of a huge brown bear on the path ahead. Brushing through the screen of bushes that had hidden its presence, it stood on his hind legs and growled at them; lips pulled back from long fangs dripping with drool, long black claws twitching erratically from its huge, dinner-plate sized paws. It’s beady eyes were locked on Grace’s horrified blue ones.

“Mistress! Hold on!” Grace squealed, rearing her body and flailing with her front hooves. On her back she heard the old woman cursing wildly as she clung to the saddle horn with manic strength.

The bear, seeing that its display hadn’t sent them running to be easy prey, tried a different tactic. Dropping to all fours it charged, becoming a locomotive of flesh and teeth. Grace danced to the side of the trail, barely avoiding a swipe from the bear’s paw that would have laid her side open as easy as splitting a rotten log with an axe. Planting her front feet, she lashed out with her back hooves, landing a solid blow on the bear while it was still trying to turn around to bite her. The bear huffed in pain, but did not slow its assault.

For a moment, both combatants fell apart, eyeing one another as they caught their breath and readied for the next bout. Grace felt sweat sting her eyes and she longed to clear them, but didn’t dare give the bear even a momentary advantage. She was on the wrong side of the creature to escape, the hut was past him and further along the trail. She was much faster than the bear, but in the mud and slick rock he had the advantage in speed. This was a fight she could not win, she realized in horror. She had to get the mistress off her back and send her for help while she kept the beast back and away from her.

“Grace! Get back a bit.” Her mistress’s voice was firm. Grace immediately obeyed, stepping back several steps and turning slightly to give her an advantage, though she worried about the danger. The bear, sensing weakness, raced in, jaws agape.

Grace reared, desperately trying to protect her passenger from harm. This time however, the old woman adjusted to her unsteady mount easily, her right palm erect and stretched towards the bear, her staff spinning crazily in her other hand.

The bear abruptly shrank in mid-charge, its thick brown fur shortening and changing color to a splotchy white and black. His muzzle vanished, to be replaced with a short, constantly twitching pink nose and long whiskers. The short ears on its head elongated, standing erect and turning constantly. In moments, where the forest's deadliest predator had been, a very surprised and horrified rabbit lay quivering on the ground, trying to understand what had happened.

"Well." The witch said slowly, savoringly. "It looks like there'll be rabbit for dinner tonight."

The rabbit, while not understanding her words, clearly knew what her tone meant. It took off, moving with the speed and agility of a jackrabbit. In a split second it was gone.

"I thought so. Fearless predator indeed!" the witch laughed.

The woman finally slipped off Grace's back and walked around the still gasping centaur. She took a critical look at her, healing any scratch or wound she found with a few words and a wave of her staff. When she finished, she slid back into the saddle and they started forward.

"Let's go home." The witch commanded.

"Yes mistress." Grace responded. She kept her eyes constantly moving around. She didn't want to be caught by surprise again!

"And thank you...sister." The witch whispered. The elder sister leaned forward and gave Grace a hug. Grace's left ear simply twitched in acknowledgement.

Together, they continued up the trail, rounding a bend and disappearing from view.