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The Sword of Death

by
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Once upon a time, a lovely, lonely woman sat upon the beach under the crescent moon and a sky full of stars. Her fingers, like the ebb and flow of the sea upon the land, brushed against the necklace she wore, a strand of honey-colored stones and hearts of plumrose. She wore her best dress, layers of cerulean and sapphire, aquamarine and larimar, but she was sad and her tears dropped and disappeared into the sand that covered her toes.

The breeze, her friend, wrapped warm around her shoulders, comforting her with the scents of the inner island, coconut palms and pineapple lilies. A small, dark jungle cat lay curled by her feet, seeming to sleep. The wind warned the cat first and it raised its head, watching with calm, iridescent eyes as a stranger approached.

In the moonlight, a glittering skittered across stranger's shoulders and the wind, ever curious, pulled at the long tails of her grey jacket and the wide legs of her trousers. The newcomer perceived the sad woman sitting in the dark and paused, touching the brim of her sateen top hat in greeting. Then the stranger looked down at the little jungle cat.

The animal returned the gaze, unafraid of the stranger's odd, opaline eyes. The grey woman smiled and nodded her head to the animal as if they had simply exchanged pleasant observations on the evening.

The woman of the island, having studied the newcomer's silhouette, hid her face when the stranger turned to her. It took several moments for the sad woman to regain herself. But when she could, she lifted her face and met the steady, silent gaze of the stranger's milky eyes. A strange, fierce emotion blossomed between them, settling itself deep within their bosoms.

They stayed this way for an unknown time, gazing into the secret places within each other. The woman sitting on the beach had eyes that were dark and cool like an ancient cavern harboring a mountain spring. The newcomer's eyes were silver and mist, reminiscent of soft rain in the highlands of a cold country. The wind, oblivious to the deep, eternal ache that yawned between them, teased their unbound hair and carried its own whisperings to the sea.

After a time, the sad woman, no longer sad, inclined her head. The stranger accepted the invitation and sat, reaching into her grey vest. She offered the island woman a pearlesque pocket kerchief to wipe her tears, though they were already dry. They exchanged no words, but kept close company, watching the moonlight caress the crest of each wave as it broke against the beach.

When the sky in the east turned coral-colored with the dawn, the stranger stood and brushed sand off the back of her trousers. She offered her pale hand to the dark woman dressed in colors of the sea. Together they walked away from the light and disappeared into the lush, green growth of the inner island.

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And so it was that the bone witch dissolved the sorrow of the island witch and grew to love the dark woman's laughter and songs and shades of blue. The island witch, in turn, fell in

love with the stillness of the bone witch, the way she spoke with her stardust eyes and her long, gentle fingers.

A millennia passed, or the lover's equivalent, and the women of power were happy. They shared their modest, comfortable home of mahagoni with the little jungle cat and a chime of wrens, their wings tipped in gold.

The island witch was a creature of light. She would spend long hours of each day on the sand, her dress laid over a fallen tree as she worshiped warmth and clarity. The bone witch would sit near her, in the shadow of a grand breadfruit tree, slowly turning pages of poetry or adventure.

In the dark, the bone witch would leave her jacket and small clothes on the cooling sands and wade into the night sea, an undulating echo of the stars and sometimes the moon. She would lie on her back in the water and speak to the fig eater bats that flitted above, invisible to the eye. The island witch, standing on the beach, her toes kissed by the edge of the tide, would weave protections for her reckless paramour.

There were others on the island. Gentle peoples who found the happiness of the witches extended to the happiness of all things. The mountain rumbled, but did not scream. The storms bent the trees but did not break their shelters. The guava and plumrose grew large and sweet, and the taro stayed bountiful. Sleek, steel-colored sharks circled the island, but never entered the reef where the people hunted colorful fish and dove for delicious meats in hard shells, all delicacies.

One day, a warm breeze kissed the small leaves of the ironwood, causing them to curl back toward their stems. The vervets shivered and hugged each other high in the branches of their kapok tree. Their young hid under elder arms and remained unusually silent.

In their home, the women hesitated. The island witch, cutting lemons in the kitchen, lifted her nose and breathed deeply of the air. The bone witch, teasing the little jungle cat on the floor, let fall the crystal in her hand. Together they rose to meet the intruder on their shore.

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She was beautiful, the fire goddess that waited for them. Her caramel skin was radiant in the late afternoon light, shimmering as if the air around her yearned to catch and burn. The sand beneath her perfect feet had turned to fractured glass. The witches could only fall to their knees, murmuring adulations.

The goddess's smile was broad and warm. She was pleased with their greeting, though she did not address them straightaway. Instead, she strolled along the beach, occasionally turning back to see if they were watching. The waves that dared to touch her feet turned at once to steam and rose like mist to curl around her ample thighs. Minions, resembling tongues of fire, fell from her wrists to straighten the train of sparkling sunlight that cascaded from her shoulders. When she seemed to tire of her parade, she returned to the witches.

The bone witch lifted her face as the goddess approached. And for a time, light settled upon shadow and depths were lit that had never known such brilliance. Though she trembled, the bone witch did not falter and thus earned another smile from the goddess.

"Daughter of darkness." The goddess's voice was deep and rough, like thick wood crackling as it is consumed. "I have dreamt of this place." She looked beyond the bone witch, into the jungle that lined the shore. Her golden eyes flickered as if they were solar flame, brighter than the setting sun. "I have dreamt of these deep green places and the peaceful trails that cross the mountain side. In my sleep, I have seen the tapir playing in the grove by the great waterfall

and I have seen the hornbill soaring above the forest canopy. But in this luxuriant garden there is a sword that lies hidden. A sword that every night strikes out from the depths.” The goddess raised a hand to her slender, lovely neck. She was quiet for a moment as her eyes dulled and the memory took her. She shivered and recovered herself, letting fall her hand. “You and your woman are no threat to me, but tell me where this sword lay and I will bestow great gifts upon you.”

The bone witch could only shake her head and turn her gaze downward. There was no such weapon on their peaceful island.

The burning eyes of the fire goddess narrowed as she looked into the very core of the pale woman and found only truth. She hissed and waved her hand, dismissing the bone witch and turning to the other, the dark woman who still knelt with her forehead upon the sand.

“Daughter of paradise lift your face. Tell me what you know of the sword I seek.”

But the island witch could not raise herself from the sand, so great was her reverence. She could feel the pulse of power that emanated from the goddess. It was hot breath, undulating like a dry tide under her fingertips.

“I command you. Look at me.”

As the island witch raised her face, a heavy silence descended on the beach. The wind halted its play, not daring to interrupt the moment. The throb of power ceased its drumbeat. And even the murmuring of the water as it lapped the land quieted and grew mute.

The fire goddess stood statuesque, her breath caught in her chest. There had never been one before like the simple witch who now returned her gaze. One whose eyes and skin were nutmeg and cinnamon and whose very soul quivered in trepidation veneration.

The goddess stepped forward and caressed the flawless cheek of the island woman. The hand was neither burning nor cool, but sent a pleasant warmth to pierce the very heart of the witch. “There is no sword half as precious as your beauty, fair island woman. I’d be content with such as you by my side.”

The bone witch, sensing the wicked intentions of the goddess, rose and pulled the offending hand from her paramour’s cheek. With eyes as cold as starlight, she squared her shoulders and slowly shook her head.

“How dare you?” The goddess quivered with rage. “It is not for you to deny me! I am no mere daughter of flame. I am the light! I am the sun!” She lifted a perfect finger. A blaze leapt forth from its tip, devouring the bone witch as only holy fire might.

The daughter of darkness screamed and burned. Her charred form crumpled to the ground. With her, so too, did the island witch fall, her world incinerated. She crawled forward, taking the blackened husk of her lover into her arms with wordless sorrow. Her cries were so full of despair that the island shook, shuddering with resounding anguish. Great flocks of birds rose into the sky, disappearing into the twilight never to return. All creatures pressed their faces into the soil at their feet and wept. The distressed cries of a small hunting cat echoed through the forest.

Then the minions of the fire goddess swarmed over the island witch, separating her from the bone witch’s body. They pulled her along the beach to a crystalline dinghy, waiting partway on the sand. The goddess had already set herself upon the bench and watched as her servants tossed the witch onto the floor at her feet. And there the daughter of paradise lay, so consumed by her grief that she took no last look at her island as it faded into the dark and distance.

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“This was not a good end,” Death said as she stared down at the jagged mass of blistered and broken flesh, the brittle remains of the bone witch. The cadence of her voice danced, curling and lifting as if it was meant for riddles and songs instead of funerals. The wind, in concord, pulled her auburn hair over her shoulders and across her face. Death took a piece of green string from the pocket of her patched trousers and tied the wild mess back against her neck.

Turning her faceted emerald eyes toward the sea, she gazed toward the horizon and dug the tips of her toes into the sand. But the water only rolled, grey under a less grey, predawn sky. There were no answers to her questions here. Death crouched down to gather the dead witch’s heart.

A shadow crawled out from under the body and, sinking low, hissed at her.

Death raised her hands in surrender to the little jungle cat. “Little guardian, I mean no harm. I’ve only come to collect her.”

Death reached again for the heart she meant to have.

The quarrelsome cat raised its paw and, claws extended, swiped at Death’s fingers.

“Why do you protect her so fiercely?”

Looking once more, Death perceived the faintest flutter of life within the witch’s chest. The woman’s heart, a wounded sparrow, flapped unsteadily within its ivory cage. Slowly, the bone witch’s eyes opened. They had hemorrhaged and were now sanguine to the edge of each obsidian pupil.

“Yet alive, are you?” Death sucked on her teeth. “What are you holding on for, lass? Give it up. I’ve got a sweet, silent place for you to rest.” She reached once more for the heart.

The witch’s eyes widened, her lips parted. Her groan was breathy and weak, the last sigh of one mortally wounded. But she did not surrender. Instead, she stared at Death, defiant.

“I see.” Death withdrew her hand and stood, looking away from the scorched body. Daylight crept toward them over the sand as the sun rose behind the mountain, slowly revealing all corners of the island. In the shade for only a moment more, Death knelt again beside the fallen woman.

“I cannot give you more life,” she said, picking up a fistful of sand and letting it slip through her fingers. “But, I will not take that which you retain. Instead, I will take you into my service. You will become my shadow and my vengeance. In return, I will give you the strength you need and a day and a night for your revenge. Do you agree?”

The thing that was once the bone witch closed her eyes in consent.

“Then rise, creature of darkness, living ember, servant of Death. Find your peace through punishment and then return to me.” Death bent down to scoop up the little jungle cat as the creature of darkness found the strength to stand.

Heat radiating from her ruined flesh, the creature with eyes of blood regarded Death and the animal quiet in her arms. Then she turned and staggered away down the beach.

Death looked down to find the little jungle cat staring up at her, its striated verdant eyes revealing none of its emotion. “It’s just us then, little guardian.”

The creature tucked its head into her shoulder. “We’ve come to an understanding, have we?” Death chuckled and scratched the cat under its chin. “Then I suppose you’ll be coming with me.” Seduced with such gentle caresses, the little jungle cat began to purr.

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The wrens from the island, wingtips dipped in gold, flitted around the servant of Death as she climbed. They encouraged her in their tense, abbreviated language, though she did not seem

to hear them. Unlike the other birds of the island, they had not fled. Instead, they had followed the one that was their mistress across the sea to another, larger island. And, for the duration of the journey, they had not ceased their thoughtless commentary.

The creature of darkness felt no pain nor exhaustion as she moved ever upward, ever closer. Her movements were automatic, steady and rhythmic. She was possessed now of strength enough to serve her purpose.

The encouragement of the wrens was only the muted sigh of phantoms fluttering above her head. So, despite their chirping notice, the creature of darkness was startled to find there were no more rocks above her head. She crawled over a ledge and stood upon the threshold of the fire goddess's pavilion.

By measure of the sun, it was the middle of the night. But the pavilion shone as if light itself had settled in its halls. Great marble pillars rose, connected at their capitals by corded lines draped in layers of white fabric. Thin cotton rippled against braided silk, softened linen against shining satin, walls of impermanence in a place of immortality. Stars, brilliant despite the local glow, glittered in the firmament, a celestial ceiling.

The living ember, devil with garnet-colored eyes, entered the pavilion, stepping away from the curtains that seemed to reach for her as she passed. Those that did brush skin fluttered away blemished, smeared with dark copper and rust-colored stains. The walls were several sheets thick but soon parted, revealing a stark, central room.

The space was empty save a single, raised dais on which a simple, marble throne was set. There the fire goddess lounged, golden pillows behind her back. She was humming tunelessly and stroking the dark hair of the island witch who knelt at her feet, her head in the goddess's lap.

The witch saw the creature first and raised her head. When she recognized the warped figure, her swollen eyes widened and her sad mouth dropped open. A strangled noise escaped her lips before she began to cry.

The goddess rose without a word and, as if she had been expecting a guest, clapped her hands together. A table shrouded in sparkling cloth appeared, blanketed in golden plates and goblets. Each dish and cup was full to its edge, brimming with the nourishment of gods.

"You must be famished after such a climb," the goddess said as she picked up a goblet, lifting it in salute before taking a sip. "Refresh yourself." Then she turned her back to the creature of shadow and returned to her throne, handing the cup to the island witch. The daughter of paradise took the cup thoughtlessly, her cheeks still wet with tears. She stared at the thing that had once been her beloved.

The creature of darkness returned the gaze of the island woman before taking up a chalice from the table and holding it beneath her nose. She set it back between two enormous platters and slipped a golden knife into her other hand, holding the handle at an angle. The serrated blade nestled against her wrist, remaining unseen.

"You'd ask for her freedom," the goddess said as she reached down to brush the back of her fingers against the island witch's cheek. The daughter of paradise flinched away from the touch, spilling wine on her dress. The witch stared at the splatter as it settled into the fabric, dark like blood.

The goddess frowned and took the cup away from the woman at her feet. "She won't be leaving." Then a thoughtful expression crossed the goddess's face as she watched the remnant of the bone witch moved toward the dais. The creature walked with a sort of shuffle, one shoulder thrown forward as if its weight could pull the rest of her body. But underneath, there was an

unexpected grace, a yearling finding its footing. “You are more resilient than I’d thought,” the goddess said, touching the edge of the goblet to her lips. “I might have a use for you.”

The island witch suddenly sobbed, falling forward onto her hands. She began to crawl forward, but the goddess grabbed a thick handful of the woman’s hair, pulling her back against the throne. “No. You are mine.” She again stroked the dark hair, a gentleness to balance the cruelty. When she looked up, the creature of shadow stood next to the throne, a smoldering hatred in her injured eyes. A smile flickered over the goddess’s mouth.

“I see your purpose now,” she said, tilting her head and regarding the charred hand the creature held half behind its back. “You’ve come to kill me.” The goddess stood, drawing back her sparkling cloak and holding her hands away from her sides. “Take your swing then.” She laughed. It was a warm, radiant sound. “Smite me.”

The creature that had once been the bone witch did not hesitate. She swung her arm, not towards the goddess’s exposed middle, but toward her face. The daughter of fire, her gaze still lifted in mirth stepped away at the last moment, though too slowly. The golden blade grazed the curve of her cheek. A single drop of blood slipped down to the goddess’s jaw and dripped onto her uncovered shoulder.

The daughter of fire, her beautiful face slack in astonishment, raised her hand and touched her cheek, staring at the fingers that came away wet and dark. Tentatively, she brought them to her lips. The tip of her pink tongue darted out, tasting the carmine ichor. In an instant, her continence twisted and her brow darkened. She snarled and threw away the chalice in her hand. Holding forth the other, a slender sword of divine light appeared in her grasp.

As it manifested, the goddess swung down her holy weapon, severing the creature’s hand and wrist from her arm. The scorched flesh, weakened from incineration, was pulled from the arm, leaving two, sharpened prongs of bone bare to the elbow. The creature of shadow stared at the place where her hand had been.

The island witch screamed and threw herself at the goddess. Her thin fingers curled like claws and her lips drew back over her teeth.

The goddess held the witch away with one hand, careful to keep the celestial sword out of her reach. “Stop. Stop this nonsense now.”

But the island woman did not quit. She howled, tearing at the arm that held her, seeking some weakness. But there was none. Immortal strength flowed through the veins of the limb that restrained her and she struggled in vain. In desperation she grabbed the goddess’s wrist and bit her.

The daughter of fire shouted in surprise and shook her arm, tossing the witch aside. The woman of the island, only mortal, was lifted from her feet and sent back, thrown against one of the marble pillars. Something cracked within her body and she did not rise.

The goddess’s expression instantly fell. Her chin quivered in disappointment. “I suppose neither of us will have her now.” Her shoulders dropped and she turned back to the creature of darkness. “I do think we mi—”

Twin blades of bone slid effortlessly through the center of the goddess’s neck. The sword of light in her hand guttered and then went out. Choking, she reached for the weapon in her throat. She coughed and blood speckled her elegant mouth. Losing the strength to stand, she slipped to her knees. The creature of shadow sank with her, keeping her arm straight and steady.

“Release me.” The goddess gasped. Her eyelids fluttered and she shuddered. “You can not kill me. Not truly. So, release me.” When the creature of darkness did not move, the goddess

screamed, tears of frustration slipping down her cheeks. “Release me or there will be no more light. You will never again know day or warmth.”

The living ember drew back her charred lips and smiled. The pale, ruined porcelain of her teeth grotesque against the black, broken flesh. Her voice, when she spoke, was the rasp of stone dragged over jagged steel, sharp and merciless. “What care the dead for day? Without that which you’ve taken from me, there is no light.”

The creature of darkness took up the golden knife from the floor and began to cut. When she was through, she held high the head of the fire goddess. From her hands it was lifted by the chime of loyal wrens and carried away. The birds set the relic on the highest branch of a giant kapok tree, vowing it would never fall to rain or wind or into the hands of callous man.

The body of the witch that the creature of darkness had loved was carried home, to their island, though it was no longer the place they had loved. No birds sang their welcome. The people cowered in their small homes. The mountain belched and lava crept down its face. Laid to rest under the sand she so loved, a deep, sorrowful peace settled over the land.

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In a place far from the island, massive oaken doors swung open, allowing a cold wind to strike into the warm heart of the great hall. Gay conversations grew hushed as those gathered turned, curious and expectant. Tankards were held halfway to lips and those with full mouths chewed slowly and swallowed, curiosity pausing their feasting. The smell of wet coal preceded the entrance of an odd figure.

It had once been human, by the form that had been left to it. But it had suffered a great conflagration and now the thing that shuffled toward the head of the table was no more human than any other sitting in the hall. It was a devil of ruined flesh, eyes like blood, one arm reduced to its bared bones.

Death rose from her seat at the head of the table and stepped forward to greet the unfortunate thing as it approached. Her smile was wide and genuine and she set her hand on its shoulder. “I take your return to mean you were successful. Though, you seem to have misplaced one of your hands.”

The newcomer, who had been looking over the others gathered in the hall turned to Death, a question in its eyes.

“Ah, no. She is not here.” Death’s smile faltered and though she lowered her voice, her tone stayed even and kind. “She is true dead and has gone to her final rest. Those you see here are your new kin. Beasts of half-life, born of rage and vengeance and such passions that hold them to this plane for a time. They, like you, reap the souls of the unwilling and the unworthy.”

One of the beasts, a large man, his skin the color of fresh cream and eyes that looked to have been dug out of his skull, handed Death two cups from the banquet table. She offered one to the creature of darkness. Then she turned to those gathered and raised her glass.

“To the silent rest,” she said. The sentiment was echoed in chorus. Then all the beasts and devils sipped from their tankards and goblets and returned to their interrupted conversations.

Death drank from her cup, regarding the bones that protruded from her servant’s arm. “It is a clean break,” she said. “We’ll find you another.” Then she motioned toward the head of the table, at the empty seat to the right of her own. As she walked away, the creature of shadow, living ember, croaked.

Death’s green eyes caught the firelight in the hall and shimmered. “What was that?”

“A sword,” the creature of darkness said. “I wish for a sword.”

There was a breath of stillness and then a smile grew upon Death’s face, a flower of comprehension. “A sword,” she said and nodded. “A sword instead of a hand.” She put her arm around the creature’s shoulder and together they moved toward their seats. “Yes, I do believe a sword would better suit your purpose.”