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The Giving Treespirit

The treespirit moved in whispered conspiracy with the ground itself. Leaves that should have crunched, softened. The earth absorbed her heavy footfall with rapt attention, and trees bowed away in deference when she slipped between their trunks, though they couldn't help but reach back for the chance to brush their leaves with hers. The treespirit was by nature an observer, but she'd spent too many years on the precipice of action, watching and waiting for something to change.

The neighboring logging community's incursion was unyielding. The whistle's piercing coo and the accompanying huffs that had started up several years ago had signaled an era of unprecedented loss. In the treespirit's wake, the forest sang of its newfound joy and its festering

pain in all the ways it knew how. Trees emitted pheromones into the air. Rustling leaves harmonized with chirruping birds and busy insects into a collective longing.

Save us.

She might have been mistaken for a nude woman from a distance, yet the treespirit's shape was significantly older than mankind's. Humanity had converged on the likeness of spirits over millions of years in its enduring effort to transcend itself. Spirits, on the other hand, have never desired to be other than they are. Up close it was clear that the treespirit was neither nude nor clothed, the distinction itself an irrelevant binary. She was both primordial and timeless, and—for all intents and purposes—she was a tree.

Like her less-mobile children, instead of bones and flesh the treespirit was coated in knobby bark and made of wood. Her face was round with no distinguishing features or angles. She had no mouth, no nose. She had only matte black eyes that never turned or moved, and which certainly never darted. A lion's mane of thin, snarled branches stuck out from the treespirit's shoulders and head, each of which held tufts of green leaves and were dotted with budding acorns. She was a black oak, and she was the spirit of this forest that had once stretched from the mountains all the way down into the surrounding lowlands for miles and miles.

The treespirit was the steward of balance, a duty she performed with gentle nudges and soft suggestions. She was avatar of the forest itself, but she was also only one part of the much larger collective, and so she was never hasty in her decision to intervene. Change took centuries. Balance mostly kept itself.

The systemic genocide of her forest had been easy to overlook. Until it wasn't.

“Be gone, demon.”

A loud bang led to searing pain unlike anything the treespirit had ever felt before. She staggered backwards. A woman stood against the moonlight in the open frame of the sawmill, musket in hand. Her unkempt brown hair had been haphazardly thrown up. She wore a loose white gown, and her exposed skin was pink with chill.

The treespirit had followed the river downstream to this place where death surrounded her. Its structure was made of wood, sawdust everywhere. Cuts of wood piled up to the ceiling and halves of trees lay on long tables near waiting discs of jagged teeth.

An excited dog barked somewhere off in the distance.

The woman pulled another lead ball out of a bag slung over her shoulder and plunged the barrel of her weapon with practiced, fluid movements. In less than twenty seconds, she had the barrel aimed once again at the treespirit’s chest. Her composure was shaken, but the woman’s determined glower hardened even as her hands shook.

The treespirit was greeted with another projectile. The woman reached into her bag once more, but the treespirit lurched forward with a gnarled hand and hoisted the woman into the air. A muffled scream belched out of the woman’s throat, and she kicked bare feet at the treespirit’s trunk. She did not stop even when she began to leave bloody footprints on the treespirit’s barkskin.

The treespirit plucked the musket away as if it were no more than an apple and dropped the woman to her knees. She coughed once, but the treespirit had been gentle. The woman pushed herself up from the floor, eyeing the sawblade not five feet from the treespirit.

“What are you?” The woman asked. Then she inhaled sharply and clasped her hands to her head. She rapped a knuckle against her temple. “Will told me I’d imagined you from his stories.” She backed up and shook her head. “Said he’d played along to make me happy.” There was something familiar in the woman’s face, but the rest of her was foreign to the treespirit. Perhaps she knew the Curious Man.

Trees keep no secrets. The woman smelled the violence of the treespirit’s mission in her leaves. The night’s chilly breeze whispered its confirmation.

“You can take whatever your business is elsewhere,” the woman said, her deep voice shrewd and level. “I don’t need whatever trouble you’re bringing to my town. We have enough problems here already.” Her words hung heavy with past hardships and the certainty of future ones.

The treespirit raised a long arm. The woman squeezed her eyes shut and steeled herself.

“We have done you no harm!” She believed this, interestingly.

After a moment, the woman peeked and found the treespirit’s body, right where a rib cage might have been, inches from her face. The initials *HM* were carved crudely into the treespirit’s bark, and the woman swore.

“I’m sure he meant nothing by it, spirit,” she said. “What do you want me to do? I can punish him. He’ll go without supper for a week. Two, if you wish.” Blood had turned the dirt black at the woman’s feet. “A month!”

The treespirit met her imploring look. The answer was clear in her silence.

“Please. He’s not well.”

The treespirit snapped the musket in two as if it were a twig and let the two halves clatter to the ground.

The woman gasped. A savage garden of weeds and straggly flowers was growing silently up through the cracks in the sawmill floor. They crept across the woman's feet and twined up her ankles, blooming in timelapse and wet with droplets of her blood. She ripped at them frantically.

A chorus of dogs had joined the first. The treespirit left the sawmill without another glance spared for the woman who lived with the Curious Man. Her time was running low, but the treespirit's pace did not quicken. She either moved, or she did not.

How had it come to this?

#

The treespirit was not one of *those* mischievous spirits who delighted in revealing themselves. She rarely left the forest, and her encounters with humans had been strictly from afar. The Curious Man had been the first person to ever see her rooted there among the other trees. He had paused to rest at her feet and taken out a sharp tool to slice an apple. After eating, he'd stood and dreamily carved something into her trunk. When the man had lifted his chin to admire the forest canopy, he nearly fainted from the sight of another face looking back at him.

She had been struck right away by the nonchalant agency the Curious Man demonstrated with the smallest of gestures. He made more choices in a breath than the treespirit made in days of deliberation, but he seemed unaware of the profound impact his presence had on the forest around him. Each word the Curious Man spoke was pressed with many layered emotions. They were so robust and concentrated—quite different than the subdued messages passed between the interwoven toes of treekind.

Rumor spread immediately across the vast, underground fungal network under her feet. The mycelium and its infinite clusters of stringy, white hyphae could carry more than nutrients between the forest's trees. It had not been long before trees on the far side of the farthest mountain were buzzing with revelation that a human was befriending their treespirit. Hemlocks were such avid gossips. Pines might feign disinterest, but they fooled only themselves.

The Curious Man had told her how he was in search of land to settle with his family. He had hiked in to survey the forest for edible berries and wildlife and asked if his family might humbly use the treespirit's magnificent trees to build shelter and tools. Of course, the treespirit said, as did the trees themselves. All life is precious to the forest.

He'd continued to visit the treespirit often, and she welcomed his company. When the treespirit heard the crunch of the Curious Man's boots approaching, her anticipation could cause trilliums a mountain away to burst into bloom. He taught his children to read at her feet with aromatic, leather-bound books. His daughter's tinkling giggles particularly endeared the treespirit, and she enjoyed being a royal subject when the girl pretended to be a powerful queen. The Curious Man's son, more somber than his sister, ignored her mostly. The treespirit did not fault him for this. He did not seem to experience her like his father and sister did as much more than a tree, the same as any other in the forest. When he did catch her there, he'd blink and soon his gaze would slide off of her like it had never happened.

Humans spent much of their time in the past and future it seemed, plotting and predicting and remembering. The treespirit had never had much reason to consider anything other than the present. The Curious Man spoke emphatically of the myriad reasons one might seek a fresh start. He regaled her with stories of pioneers and their hardships heading west. His own wife had not survived their trip.

When his family had needed more wood, she gave trees again happily. Humanity was a wonderful, new kind of life to her. In the Curious Man, the treespirit had found a kind of kindred spirit. In his absence, she found that she was lonely in a way not possible before. The forest's flora and fauna and fungi could not look at her and make her feel as real, as present, as the whites of human eyes holding hers could. It seemed no accident that their form mirrored her own. Under the hazy blue of night, the treespirit found herself imagining how it might feel to be human, how it must be to feel so alive all the time.

The Curious Man had attempted to teach her to smile, but with no mouth it was a difficult task. He would lean in and demonstrate the way his lower eyelids squinched, said this was more important than the smile itself anyway. It's how other people determined if you were being genuine. The treespirit had never thought about what her face was doing before this. She had so many ways to communicate, all of them earnest.

Little by little more families had joined the Curious Man. Tales of a family blessed by a local spirit disseminated on mankind's own information network across the country via travelling merchants and in drunken tavern communions. These stories had been carried back to the treespirit on the curled shoulders of windspirits. Perhaps this is when she should have started thinking about the future.

With each cycle of the moon, the Curious Man's asks had grown greater. Humans were arriving from too many places with names too complicated to comprehend, and they all needed cabins built and tools crafted and fires lit. Camps of humans sprung up farther and farther into the forest along the river, each felling more trees with their burly beasts who trampled the earth and ate all day. She could not see them, but the mycorrhizal network at her feet told her all. The Curious Man assured her this was progress. It was all thanks to him.

The treespirit urged more seeds to become saplings and more saplings to grow tall to fill the gaps in the canopy. To ensure their survival through the harsh winters, she taught the younglings to ration their nutrients during the lush springtime sun usually blocked by the wider adults. Even without her, life usually found a way. Balance would come again. It always did.

The Curious Man's visits became rarer and rarer. His focus shifted to what was becoming a popular destination for those heading west. The treespirit listened every day for the Curious Man's approach, but soon he no longer came into the forest at all. Years passed by, as they do when you are a tree.

Like fireflies winking out in the night air, she felt every single tree go. What had been a small gift had become so much more. Humans trekked through the forest with little regard for the other living things, not as guests but as owners. Clanking metal for months near the town had culminated in the screech of a humongous bird of prey. The monstrous rumbling and hissing that followed had been the beginning of the unstoppable onslaught. The loss that had only ringed the boundary of the forest raced inward at a disorienting pace, each thunderous crack an insatiable monster's incoming footstep.

It had taken the felling of a tree close enough for the treespirit to see it for her to realize that balance was not coming on its own. The way its body compressed on impact, how shanks and splinters of wood had billowed out in clouds into the forest air...

Soft snow snuggled the ground while the treespirit thought about her place in the rich tapestry of the forest. All through that winter, she pondered the role she should or should not play in it until wriggling noses poked out of burrows and the snow melted away.

The treespirit uprooted herself on the first day of spring of the thirty-sixth year since the Curious Man had found her. Clumps of vegetation and grass dangled from stringy roots and clinging fungal hairs. Dirt rained down as she stepped first her left foot, then her right, onto the earth's surface. Her barkskin crackled and popped, stretched and snapped. An emotion, something hot and acute, burned in her trunk. Her vast well of generosity had been artfully siphoned by the Curious Man's sleight of hand. The forest would not survive if she did not stop the trick.

For the first time in a very long time, the treespirit found herself beyond the boundaries of her forest, tall, balding mountains at her back. The stumps of stolen trees poked the barren detritus where there should have been goliaths. What should have been a backdrop of brown bark and green crowns was an empty void. Her generosity had brought destruction.

The Curious Man had taught the treespirit a most valuable lesson: change requires action.

#

The treespirit traced the woman's scent past a long chain of train cars loaded with wood. At the slumbering town's perimeter, rows of empty shops extended into the distance before giving way to homes. Neighing horses and concerned, garbled shouts nipped at the treespirit's heels. The woman had beelined directly from an old, dilapidated house separate from the others not far from the sawmill.

On its front lawn, a stunning weeping willow puffed out before the treespirit. Furry catkins clung to lithe, drooping branches. They cascaded down his body and rippled like the surface of a pond. Trees who grew alone, like this willow had, were stubborn and independent beings. To survive untethered to other trees required determination; their strength was not in

community but in tenacity and resilience. He was not a native species. The willow had no kin, no mycorrhizal network. He hid his insecurities poorly, and the treespirit graciously allowed him the farce otherwise, offering no pity.

I don't suppose you're here to visit me after all these years.

The treespirit was taken aback. By “years” he could not mean more than thirty or forty, at most, probably planted by the Curious Man on arrival. He was old for a willow though, and his dim gray bark was peeling off in strips.

A treespirit does not leave her forest unattended lightly.

His unspoken cadence was curiously reminiscent of human speech, and he used the wind in his hollows to gesture and emphasize. While the statement had been simple enough, there was much simmering beneath the surface. He breathed in the treespirit.

I see. How very human of you.

You judge a spirit?

I have spent my entire life at humanity's doorstep. Sometimes I feel I am more one of them than I am a tree. While you have watched eras of the forest come and go, I will not live long enough to even see the next human generation. They really are something, are they not?

The willow's airy, feathered catkins waved in the breeze. It touched at the grooves in the treespirit's cheeks like a tender lover, and a patronizing murmur fluttered round its perimeter.

I see they've left their mark in you. It must be difficult for one of such scale, who sees so much, to suddenly see the trees for the forest. It must feel so personal. An attack against you, the great treespirit of the great forest.

A different kind of magic than that which the treespirit was intimately familiar with coursed through this willow's cambium. Urgency dripped from him like sap. He was lapping up every moment of his short life. Like a human.

So, you see only the destruction they wreak, how their will imparts on the world.

Yes.

You experience their ravenous, ceaseless desire for progress as callous disregard for the home we all share.

Yes.

Then you know them not at all. You are a sapling again, in the world anew. You might as well squish a hornet for stinging or stomp a snowflake for the storm. I can feel your loneliness. I share it, in fact.

That was enough.

But they are not like you, treespirit, as much as you may wish they were. They do not see it all, as you do. Like the rest of us, they only wish to live well.

The treespirit turned to go.

Think on your actions this night, treespirit. And consider what that means of theirs in the future.

His last sentiments were to her back.

The treespirit cautiously ascended the steps of the old house's porch that had a rictus of white pillars. Her hands were steady but stiff, and the treespirit pushed a single finger into the

center of the large door. Its deadbolt snapped with a gruesome crack. The door hinged open. The treespirit's crest of branches barely scraped through the doorframe, and doing so plucked several leaves from their perches prematurely.

Even in the darkness, a universe of alien hues, fabrics, and angles greeted her. Embers faded in a stone hearth to her left, and anxious shadows pulsed on the ceiling. The floorboards whimpered beneath her dense form. The sounds and smell of another human pulled the treespirit up the stairwell in front of her. Each step was again and again the farthest she'd ever been from the ground in her long life.

At the landing, the treespirit turned left. A heart beat nearby, and the treespirit followed the vibrations of its rhythmic thump to a room at the far end of the hallway. With another push of a finger, she popped open a second closed door. The treespirit ducked inside.

"Ma?" A small figure in a small bed stirred, waiting for an assumed reply. Any light that might have come through the window from the moon was blocked by a thick curtain.

Several layers of blankets rustled, then a match was struck. The flame was transferred to drooping wax on the end table at the bed's side, and the room was cast in warm candlelight. The small boy had the same color hair as the woman and ears that were far too big for his little head. His sunken, sallow cheeks pooled the candlelight and cast the rest of his face in shadow. His chest barely peaked over the covers tucked in tightly around him. He was very warm.

The boy did not scream. He contemplated the treespirit's sudden appearance, still deciding how it should make him feel.

“Hello,” he finally said. “I’m Henry.” A wet, violent cough erupted from his body that stole the air from his lungs. He grabbed a handkerchief to catch what he could. When it stopped, the boy greedily sucked in air. It made a sound similar to the train whistle.

“Sorry.” He shrugged. “I can’t help it.”

Where was the Curious Man? The woman had spoken as if he was here.

“Are you a tree?”

The small yellow candle flame reflected back at the boy in her beetle black eyes.

“Ma said...Ma said that—”

The boy’s voice became two pinecones scraping together, and he was seized with another coughing fit. When he was done, he leaned away from the treespirit and retched over the other side of his bed. Sick splattered into a tin bucket. He recovered quickly and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his nightgown.

He was talkative, excited to have a visitor. “Ma said grandpa used to tell stories about a forest spirit before he died.”

Understanding more painful than any bullet dawned on the treespirit. How long ago?

“I never met him.”

The woman must have reused her late father’s name for the boy, which the treespirit could already feel slipping from her, like water from the river cupped in her hands.

“Was he your best friend too?” The boy spoke to her the same way his grandfather had, needing little and offering up much.

“Do you know my ma too?” The boy said. “She’s in charge o’ the sawmill.”

Scents of affirmation emanated off the treespirit. The boy smiled, and the treespirit felt more real than she had in decades. The lilting laughter of the Curious Man’s daughter echoed in the treespirit’s mind. The boy was about the size of his mother when she had spent time in the forest, only so much more brittle. His frailness turned the whole room to glass. She had the impulse to turn and leave.

“An’ the workers too. She works all the time. Sometimes I don’t see her before or after school.” He beamed with pride just thinking about his mother. “When I went to school, I mean.” The boy coughed, and then said, “Folks from way far away use her trees to build huge ships. How neat is that?”

Her trees.

“I really want to go on a ship someday. Ma says I’ll get better.” He played with the handkerchief in his hands. The boy became pensive, forgetting the treespirit’s hulking presence. “I don’t know.”

The treespirit could not leave though. The forest was counting on her, and she had thought the Curious Man’s death would be the appropriate message, that it would destroy the town as they were destroying the forest. Except that he was already gone, and the town was still here, thriving in his absence. She remembered the willow’s musings. How human of her, to come here, scorned, to force her will with violence. How spirit of her, to see the Curious Man as avatar as she was instead of animal as he really was.

She had been so eager to see in the Curious Man her own reflection that she’d projected an equal onto him, believed him to be special, not spirit but something magical in between with

whom she could share herself and learn from. So, the Curious Man's supposed betrayal had wounded her deeply, but the standards of spirits could not possibly apply to creatures of the forest, which humanity had become with their first step into her domain. They were profoundly tactile, complex, and sensually cerebral, yet they were animals nonetheless. There was much she could learn from them, and the treespirit was confident she did not want it to look like this.

Scenarios and decades of consequences played out before her. The treespirit was transported from one possible future to the next. In many, the survival of her forest came at the price of human life. In others, the loss of the forest was inevitable and permanent. Then it came to her. She had been thinking first like a spirit, and then a human. The treespirit realized now that she should have been thinking like a tree all along.

The fungal filaments that still clung to her ankles began to writhe. As one, the mycelium crept along the ground and pulled itself up her legs, growing and probing and finding the next groove of her barkskin or divot in the floorboards to grip. A spiderwebbed pattern of branching white hairs rolled up the treespirit's body in accelerating waves. They crisscrossed up her until she wore it like the mesh armor of a white knight. Even more climbed from the floor to the bedspread. Hyphae surged towards her fingertips. Time was not on her side. This required more of a harsh push than it did a gentle nudge.

The boy's mouth opened wide in a moan of terror that never quite manifested. The treespirit held her hand out to the boy. He gaped at her towering figure, apparently only now comprehending how many times bigger it was than his own slight frame.

She attempted to smile as the Curious Man had taught her at the boy. It was futile, but he seemed to discern her intent. He brought his hand close to hers, though he could not bring himself to let them touch.

It was close enough. Mycelium oozed from her fingers to his as a coughing fit overtook him. The treespirit was covered head to toe, and it was fast consuming the boy. The countless hairs had woven themselves into a top blanket of white hyphae, each searching for any hole or fold that would lead them closer to him. Wherever they could find skin, the hyphae pierced it as easily and silently as freshly sharpened knives. The boy shivered under the wriggling mass, but otherwise remained still. It was not long before this white webbing had colonized more of the room than it had not.

“What’s happening?” The boy asked, his voice quavering.

Little fleshy mushrooms, throbbing and engorging, popped into existence all along the mycelium. A black rot spilled like ink up the treespirit’s waist and down her arms. Jarring fissures followed in its trail, and mushrooms sprouted in these cracks. They grew to the size of fists in seconds as the areas around them became soft and spongy. Her barkskin flaked off in chunks.

The boy cried out. “Ma? Ma!”

The fungus coiled up the boy’s neck. His breaths grew shallow and rapid as it found his face and crawled inside his mouth, his nose, his ears, and the corners of his eyes. He grimaced, tensed and arched his back. His fists clenched, and he let out a low groan that became a scream of crystalline terror. The treespirit flushed with worry. A miscalculation. A mistake. He was in pain. There were lines even her magic could not cross—

The boy collapsed. His chest did not rise, but his heart beat on. He was alive. More than alive. Every system of his body—every tissue, muscle and organ—was intertwined with the treespirit's own, plugged into their personal mycorrhizal network. He felt her and she him, a nascent collective of support and community. The boy was exhausted and fewer days from giving it all up than he had let on. He needed strength he did not possess to repel and counter the invasion depleting him. So, just like she had for the Curious Man, the treespirit gave.

Mycelium charged and crackled with electricity. The boy's lungs filled with air. He began to sob, and the treespirit knew it was not from fear or hurt. The branching hyphae hairs between the treespirit and the boy swallowed like esophagi. The junctions connecting them swelled.

There was a splitting crack, and the treespirit's right arm, now entirely black and overladen with mushrooms, severed at the shoulder. It exploded into dust when it hit the floor and became humus in nearly the same instant.

“Get away from him!”

The Curious Man's daughter appeared in the hallway. She rushed the treespirit, then wrapped her arms around the treespirit's torso, braced herself, and tugged. Her interlocked hands were stained red with the blood of countless cuts and tiny punctures. The sleeves of her nightgown were in tatters. The treespirit was backwards, much to her surprise. Then the woman's hands slipped, and she tumbled backwards.

“I will kill you, spirit.” She snarled from the floor, though she gingerly held one of her ankles in the air.

The treespirit's body expanded ever so slightly, then contracted. Then it did so again and did so again, each time smaller than it had been before. Her extra mass sprinkled to the floor as sawdust. She was sinking in on herself. The tips of the treespirit's branches sprouted her own dangling, yellow catkins. Short spikes of red flowers resembling beaks grew amongst the leaves. Last year's acorns bulged and sprung free.

As soon as they had arrived, the catkins withered and plummeted like dropped bombs. The red flowers curled back and shrunk into themselves. Where there should have been the tops of young acorns, the cupules stayed empty. The treespirit's leaves became a painter's palate of reds and oranges. Then, almost at once, they browned and leapt free, twisting and turning through the air before settling atop the jellyfish tops of dark mushrooms growing in the treespirit's decomposed remains.

"Ma?" The boy could barely speak around the hyphae in his throat. He hacked and phlegm splattered onto his chest. Tears welled where his lids were prevented from blinking all the way.

His mother sprang up before he'd even finished calling for her. She sprinted, as sure-footed as ever, to the window, stomping over the mycelium in her path without hesitation. She yanked open the window and hollered out into the night. An icy chill swept through the room, causing the candle to flicker.

"Will! I need help. Anybody, help!"

Rot continued to engulf the treespirit. Her left arm snapped and fell to the hungry fungi below. Her bouquet of branches died off all at once. If she had a mouth, she'd have been screaming.

The woman spun around and started to desperately tear at the fungal blanket on her son with clawed hands. The rips she made were healed within seconds. The muscles in the boy's arms and his legs and his chest swelled, then contracted, swelled, then contracted, each time ever so slightly thicker and healthier than they had been before. His death-kissed skin softened to a rosy pink and lifted from his bones. He sucked in a deep, purposeful breath and then coughed a dry, easy cough. The boy sat up just as the treespirit sank to her knees. The floorboards splintered where she impacted.

"Ma, stop. I feel good. Ma, stop!" His mother stopped her feverish scraping. She was panting hard. Mycelium receded from the boy's face, curling outward like a shedding skin.

The woman touched his cheeks, his forehead. She squeezed his shoulders and ran a hand down his arms. Then the Curious Man's daughter threw herself at her son and hugged him more tightly than she had in months. Her neck whipped around and she stared at the kneeling treespirit. The treespirit saw the woman through both her own view and the boy's simultaneously. These dueling vantage points wound around each other, snapping and seething, until, tired, they embraced as well.

This was the other side of humanity. This is what it meant to be human and not beast—to fiercely protect one's children, to ensure that an entire community continued to function at one's own expense over and over and over. It was individualism for the sake of the community.

Vibrations from the floor below tickled the treespirit's back. She sensed a compact heat moving up the stairs, and then footsteps pounded on the landing. This part would be important, but not yet.

"I don't—"

“She needs more time,” the boy said. “Just a little.”

Several men appeared in the doorway. The Curious Man’s daughter hesitated for only a moment before inserting herself between the treespirit and the new arrivals.

“Go home, all of you,” she said. “I’ve got it under control now.”

“What in the hell is going on here?” A bulky man said, taut with adrenaline. He spoke assertively, belied by the hot, sour smell of his mouth. He pointed another musket at the treespirit’s back.

“What is that thing?” Asked another, ax trembling in his hands.

“It looks like a spider’s den,” the third whispered, and then he waved a torch as if warding off a pack of wolves.

“It’s the treespirit,” the woman said. “She’s here to help us.”

“You have been bewitched, woman,” the sour-smelling man said. He blinked, but even he could not blink her away entirely, so out of place was the treespirit in the second floor of a house. What exactly he and the other men saw, she would never know.

“Get out of the way, Catherine,” he said. “I’m not losin’ him like Pa.”

“You don’t understand,” the woman said. “I mean, I barely do, but I know Henry is the healthiest he’s been in ages. Look at ‘im! Look at his face.”

“You’re delirious, look at yourself,” the man said. Then he shouted, “Why don’t you God damn look at the boy yourself!” He pointed at the macabre scene behind her. “Move.”

“You’ll have to shoot me, Will.”

“Fellas,” the woman addressed the two men in back directly. “I don’t ask much of you in this manner. For once I need you to acknowledge to who you truly owe for the good lives you lead with your pretty families.” She gestured to the first man. “Him?” She thumbed her chest. “Or me? Who got the railroad built? Who got the contract with Red Diamond? I know nobody in this town likes the idea of a woman runnin’ things, but if I ever need you to act as if this my town and not my drunk of a brother’s, it’s here and now.”

The woman’s brother bared his canines at her.

“If you trust in my leadership, which I know you have and will continue to do, do not let this animal come any nearer the treespirit, or else I don’t know what will happen to Henry.”

The two men exchanged glances, and then one grabbed her brother’s arm from behind. Then the other did as well.

Men were thrown into walls and door frames. Necks were choked and weapons exchanged hands. Someone fell down the stairs and let out a slew of curses when they accidentally fired the musket. The Curious Man’s son knocked his sister aside into the night stand. The candle tipped and went out, leaving only the orange of the torch that he now held at the treespirit’s back.

“She saved me!” The boy yelled. He jumped up and raised his arms in a show of well-being. “I’m not sick anymore.” His advancing uncle recoiled at the wizard’s cloak of mycelium that adorned the boy.

The treespirit sagged. It had finished. She was as black as she was brown. Her body was soft and mushy, but she was alive as planned.

The boy reached out to her, but she had no hands to receive him. He stepped closer to the treespirit and touched either of her knobby cheeks. “You’re okay.” He grinned. “I can feel it. We can be best friends too.”

Then the boy pulled back, shielding his face.

Something sharp cut through the air and lodged in the treespirit’s neck. Fire licked at her back. Another blow left her dizzy, and the room clouded.

“Will, you fool,” said the woman by the upturned nightstand. She shook her head, not in anger but the way one does when they have been let down far too often.

The boy sobbed. The treespirit felt him attempting to heal her through their connection, but there was nothing for her there. The boy was neither tree nor magic. But she had taken plenty from him already, and the treespirit did then the most human thing she had ever done.

She squinched her eyes and smiled at the boy—this boy who would now go off into the world with a little bit of treespirit coursing through his veins. Everything was going to be okay. In the long run, balance always came.

Then the swing of the ax chopped her head clean off.

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Nearly five years later, it was as if a perimeter had been drawn around the mountains and their surrounding countryside beyond which settlers knew lay only barren land. Not a single straggler resided in what had once been the burgeoning logging town adjacent to a lush, bustling forest. The town had sprung up nearly overnight as an ideal destination for those in search of a

new life and was quickly subsumed into the network of settlements all across the country fueling the mounting needs of the logging industry. Families had lived well here.

It had all come to a screeching halt when an epidemic of tree rot had washed through the far-reaching forest. It began at the pruned edges closest to the town and travelled fast up into the mountains. Loggers were pulled farther and farther from their homes for longer periods of time, ever chasing the edge of the rot. They pushed deeper into the forest away from the river and higher into the mountains. The terrain soon became too treacherous to feasibly do their work.

The forest soil no longer retained water, and the river rose with each rainfall. Flooding disrupted the town's delicate irrigation systems and waterlogged crop fields. Then the rain stopped coming at all, and soon any crops left were wilting in the dry air. Many forest animals left. Hunting became impossible. Grasses and plants around town browned and died, starving livestock. Coastal winds blew through and battered the town, filling the streets with dust and debris. The temperature rose, and although imperceptible on most days, life soon became unsustainable as the heat stole precious minutes needed for work and chores and play. To the residents, it was like a hundred years had gone by in only a few. Most deemed it not worth toughing out for long, and those that tried found their lives more difficult by the day.

It became widely known—if not believed—that this town had been blessed by a spirit and then subsequently cursed by it. A local industry baron, once the steward of a thriving market, had attempted to kill the spirit for its land and had reaped the consequences.

If any ambitious parties had dared to venture again into the area, they'd have found an eerily quiet town, but one you could plausibly believe might still be occupied, where all the residents just happened to be down at the river at once. Houses, many recently built, stood clean

and intact. Names had been freshly painted on storefronts. A sawmill at the edge of town appeared as if it might start up at any moment.

Curiously, one house was almost entirely decayed in the short time since the rot had sent settlers hightailing back east. Hundreds of succulent mushrooms grew over a white, fuzzy web of branching hairs that covered what was barely more than a pile of sippy rubble. Minimal evidence remained of any hard shape or structure. Townspeople had attempted to burn away the fungus several times, never to any noteworthy success.

The sad remnant of a once-proud weeping willow still stood sentinel at what had been a front porch. The tree's trunk was gray and peeling off in strips, though it had survived much longer than trees of the forest. In the afternoon of the very morning that the last stubborn person had finally moved away, the willow gave a deafening crack and collapsed in on itself.

A single branch, still tinted with color, had somehow managed to cling on to the rotting trunk. It hurtled towards the dry ground now and sunk straight into the dirt below, tip up. That night, fat, heavy raindrops poured from the sky, and within the week, tenacious roots were snaking their way from the bottom of the branch into the surrounding soil. Within the month, the branch was widening and stretching, becoming a tree. By the following season, the tree had grown to the size of a tall woman and was taking the shape of one too.

The lower half of the willow's trunk bisected into legs and widened with hips. Two branches took on the contours of arms and split into five, spindly fingers at the tips. A head formed in their fork between growing shoulders, from which a cluster of branches grew.

On the first day of spring, the treespirit opened her eyes, blinked and swiveled them around to survey her surroundings. Their whites dazzled in the spring sunshine, and she had

irises as green as her leaves. Long, handsome catkins sprouted from her branches and tumbled down around her, the luxurious mantle of a queen. Where before her head had been beneath her own vegetation, the treespirit now looked down upon the canopy that rippled around her. A reminder to not get caught up in the affairs of the understory.

She touched her face. It was smooth and without the papery gray bark she wore over the rest of her body. She felt cheek bones, a chin, and the subtle suggestion of lips. Between her lips a thin slit appeared, and then the treespirit opened her mouth. She flexed her jaw and made the O's of a hungry fish.

There was so much *humanity* swirling around inside her. Not a scar—a birth mark of a past life. Spiraling thoughts of the past and the future collided with intense emotions and budding ideas about the patterns of the world all around her, which before had seemed utterly simple. It was all so confusing and invigorating. Humanity was a wonderful, new kind of animal.

She was the forest still, but the treespirit was also its mother. The treespirit saw that she was not to be only one fiber of the forest's beautiful tapestry. Her role was as seamstress. She'd never before considered herself in that light. It seemed laughable now, so obvious and real in retrospect such that it was of course the way it had always been. The Curious Man's arrival had made it clear that the old ways would not suffice in the coming era, that a gentle spirit who whispered easy suggestions in the ears of the forest would no longer be enough. She would not be like them though, in their never-ending quest for progress. Was it disregard? Or ignorance? Either way, it seemed an irrelevant binary to her now.

She would be the forest's fierce protector this time around. An active leader. She would ensure that the flora, fauna, and fungi—her children—did not just endure, but that they would thrive. Even if it killed her.

The tree rot had curtailed the very instant at which the roots of the willow branch had tasted their first drop of water. The mountains and surrounding areas crackled with the energy of a triumphant return to form. The treespirit would make sure she was there to guide it.

The treespirit pulled first one foot, then the other, from the fertile earth and started towards the stumps that would lead her into the mountains. She had much to do.

Colorful trilliums immediately bloomed in the footprints she left in the earth in her wake. From now on, any who looked for the treespirit would know exactly where to find her.