

The girl walked on the path.

The trees that created the edges of the path were crooked and broken. Limbs hung warily by strands of previously fresh flesh, waiting for the last tug from gravity to fall to the ground. There were no leaves left on the branches at all; and it appeared that it had been some time since any foliage had adorned the crowns.

As the corner turned she saw a flickering in the distance, her feet scuffling the ground as they brought her closer to the source.

When the edge of the dead forest came upon her, the scene was almost surreal; a woman was sitting on a log tending a fire, the smell of acrid flesh in the air. The woman looked familiar to the girl, like she knew this person, yet she was different in some way she could not make out. When the light from the fire danced across the woman it became clear why she was so familiar yet strange; the hair upon her head was scraggly, the skin upon her body was shriveled and missing in places. There was an overall pale tone to the woman.

The girl pushed herself closer to the person and spoke the name she thought would never pass her lips again.

“Mom?” the girl asked, still perplexed by the scene.

“Hi, sweetie. C’mon over and have a seat,” Vanessa said, patting a spot next to her, directing the girl where to rest.

“Umm...you’re dead,” the girl replied as she made her way to the log. She was having a hard time believing this occurrence.

“And you’re dreaming, but that doesn’t mean we can’t talk, does it?” Vanessa said, smiling, as if in reply to the girl’s doubts and concerns.

The girl sat down, joining her mother.

“Mom, are you a zombie?” she asked.

“The prettiest one you ever saw.”

“Okay, this is officially the weirdest dream I have had in my life,” the girl announced.

“Marshmallow?” Vanessa asked, proffering a bag of large marshmallows in front of the girl.

“That’s okay, Mom. I’m still kind of dealing with the whole ‘zombie mother returned from the grave to haunt my dreams’ thing.”

“You used to love when we roasted marshmallows. Guess even little girls can grow up, huh?” the woman said with a hint of sadness to her voice. Vanessa took some marshmallows from the bag and proceeded to put them on the tips of her bony fingers. Once she made sure they were set correctly she held her hand over the flames.

“Aren’t zombies supposed to be afraid of fire?” the girl asked.

“That’s what I’ve been told, but how much fire are you going to be afraid of in a dream? Especially when the dream is your loving daughter’s, who would cause you no harm.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense is why you are going on with that Ronnie boy. I thought your father and I raised you better than that.”

“You too, Mom? Geez, it’s getting to the point that I might as well become a lesbian to get the two of you to leave me alone.”

“Are you a lesbian?” Vanessa asked sincerely.

“MOM!”

“What? It doesn’t hurt to ask. You never know, and it isn’t like I didn’t experiment when I was alive.”

“My dead, zombie mother is invading my dreams telling me that she used to go for chicks, all the while roasting marshmallows on her bony fingertips. Are you sure this isn’t a nightmare?”

“Okay, okay, enough of my living sexual life. I kind of have to get to the point of this meeting as you are going to wake up soon,” Vanessa replied.

“I just got here, I’m sure we have quite a few hours left.”

“Time moves differently here, honey. What may seem like hours can be seconds while minutes are actually hours. Not even the old mystics knew exactly how a dream worked.”

“Old mystics? I thought those were just stories used to scare children into going to bed.”

“So did I, until I died,” Vanessa replied, her tone becoming more serious as if she had remembered some event that truly scared her.

Vanessa took her fingers from the fire and offered a roasted marshmallow to her daughter, who again politely declined. Vanessa grabbed one with her other hand and popped it in her mouth, promptly spitting it out, gagging.

“Gah, those taste terrible when bits of rotting flesh are burnt into them. You had the right idea not wanting one,” Vanessa said, spitting remnants of her flesh into the fire.

“These are the moments you wish you had spit so you could get the taste out of your mouth,”

Vanessa stated, throwing the rest of the bag onto the fire, flicking the already roasted marshmallows to follow.

The mother and daughter sat in silence. Vanessa stared at the flames, watching the heat consume the marshmallows, hot gooey goodness melting from the centers onto the kindling. The girl's gaze alternated from the flames to her mother, wondering what was the meaning of this meeting.

"Mom?" the girl asked after deciding enough time had passed.

"You're special, dear," Vanessa replied.

"That's another thing you and Dad were always telling me."

"For once can we stop the smart-ass banter and you listen to me? This is important."

The girl quieted, sinking a bit into herself, as her mother had never spoken to her in that way before.

"Look, I wish things could be the way they were. I wish I could be there for you every day, our smart remarks to each other flying across the room as they used to, but it isn't going to happen. Not anymore," Vanessa said in an apologetic tone.

"You..." Vanessa continued, "You're special in more than one way. Yes, you are the kind of special your father and I always said you were, but you are special in a 'grand design of the universe' way too. You're the product of an old curse."

"Is that why you were murdered, a curse was put upon our family? Was it the mystics who put the curse on us? Is that why you cringed when I mentioned them?" the girl asked.

“The curse wasn’t put upon us, but upon those who you’re destined to oppose. The ones who cannot defeat you unless you let them.”

“You’re making it sound like a fable, Mom. And ‘oppose’? Whom am I supposed to oppose?”

“You need to heed what I’m telling you; Ronnie is not what he seems to be and neither are you. I don’t think even Ronnie knows what he is as of yet so I am hoping you will beat him to awareness.”

“Mom, you’re talking in riddles here. I can’t understand what you are saying because you aren’t saying anything of substance. Why don’t you just come out with what you’re trying to tell me? It isn’t going to hurt my feelings or anything.”

“I wish I could just tell you, dear, I really do. The problem is that I am bound by certain restrictions of what I can tell to you. You have to experience preordained events to become truly enlightened and when those happen you will be on your own.”

“What I have so far is that Ronnie might be a dick and I am more special than special. I also have to experience some kind of event, like getting my first period, and then I’ll be on my own to oppose these mysterious people that I don’t know. Am I missing anything?” the girl responded sarcastically.

“I said to knock off the smart ass comments, we don’t have time for them.”

The girl rose from the log, standing above her mother, her body language telling that she was becoming frustrated.

“Perhaps if you just told me what is going on in that rotting brain of yours I might not be such a smart ass. I’m seriously confused here, Mom.”

Vanessa took the girl's hand into hers, trying to calm her as she had many times before. The girl recoiled at the feel of bone and rotting flesh upon hers. Vanessa frowned, the girl crossed her arms, and a chill came between them that the fire could not warm.

"Let me put it this way: you're the flame. You are the fire that burns and cleanses, that takes all that it surrounds and destroys it. You are the rebirth that comes from the death. Ronnie is the opposite. Ronnie is the cold-blooded killer, the grip of death that has no remorse. He is the hunter who kills for enjoyment as much as need. He derives sexual and spiritual power from hunting his prey and taking their life."

"Okay, *now* you're scaring me."

"You should be scared, and you will be even more so before the end comes."

Vanessa remained on the log as her daughter kept her vigil before her; the flames flickered across their forms, as a chasm of silence between them grew ever larger.

"You know, I've been with Ronnie for a number of years now," the girl explained to her mother, "he hasn't done anything to hurt me, to make me feel less like a person, not one single mean thing to me. He did break that one kid's arm but that was self-defense, I saw it myself, so how is he supposed to be so bad? He's probably the sweetest guy I know outside of Dad," the girl asked.

"Your father knew before I did how evil that child is," Vanessa responded.

"Oh, so now he's evil? When did he get an upgrade from bad to evil, Mother? As this dream goes on is he going to end up becoming Lord and Master of

all that is evil? Will he start raping and pillaging whole towns while spreading his seed to envelope the planet in misery? Seriously, Mom, what the fuck is going on here?”

Vanessa stood up to face her daughter, raising her right hand to touch her daughter’s face but pulling it back before contact could be made, knowing her daughter did not enjoy the sensation as she once had, when Vanessa had been living.

“Mom, just tell me what is going on,” the girl pleaded, tears starting to form in her eyes, “if something bad is going to happen I need to know as much as possible. What you’ve told me is not the reality I know, the reality outside of this dream. I’m not trying to be stubborn, not one single bit, but in my lifetime there have been no mystics, there’ve been no forces of evil coming to route us from hearth and home, and now you want me to believe that these things exist outside of children’s books? Do you know how insane this whole thing is?”

“I love you,” Vanessa told her daughter.

“Mom?” the girl forced out, tears now starting to flow down her cheeks.

“Tell your father that I love him, and tell him you are the flaming bird. Tell him to not be afraid of what you are, to embrace it and help you along your way. Promise me this.”

“He’ll think I’m nuts,” the girl said with a forced laugh.

“Promise...” Vanessa requested softly as she turned from her daughter to face the fire. Without so much as a glance back Vanessa threw herself in.

“MOM!”

“Don’t worry dear, this isn’t going to hurt me, it’s just how I have to exit this dream. When the time comes you will understand why,” the woman said as the flames engulfed her legs.

“MOM!” the girl shouted, tears now streaking down her face, as she moved towards the fire. The flames were close to consuming Vanessa completely as her hollow eyes stared at the girl. The flesh around the cheeks started to wrinkle and fly away as ash.

“Promise...” Vanessa said weakly as the flames ignited what was left of her hair, in turn making their way to her face. Her jaw dropped from her face as the muscles burned away, falling into the base of the fire.

As the girl’s body entered the circle of flame her mother’s form collapsed, causing a great flash of light to engulf the area, blowing the girl back.

The girl’s feet felt for ground to steady her, instead they met the log, causing the girl to flail backwards onto the ground, knocking the wind out of her. As she lay there, trying to catch her breath, the girl mourned the loss of her mother for a second time, tears chokingly drowning her face.

*This wasn’t a dream this was a nightmare.
Please let me wake up, please...*

The girl caught her breath enough to sit up and look over the log. The fire was a cavalcade of colors, as if a rainbow had been caught and used as fuel. The girl climbed over the log, reaching her hand out to touch the flames, closing her eyes to brace for another explosion. When her fingers made contact she heard a loud screeching in the distance and a sensation of warmth crept onto her fingers, slowly making its way over her body.

The warmth didn't feel as if it was burning her as it spread, it was more of the feeling a person gets when they drink hot cocoa on a freezing winter day.

Once the feeling completely consumed her body the girl looked to the fire once more, seeing ashes where once was flame. The girl looked around, trying to spy any other resident in this plane of existence. She saw none.

"Mom," the girl said longingly, regretting her behavior earlier in the dream, "if only I wasn't so damned bullheaded I would've listened to you. Now I don't know if I will ever see you again and I still have no idea what is going on."

The girl sat back on the log, waiting for the dream to end so that she could speak to her father, hoping he could make some sense of it all.

As she closed her eyes the girl did not see the edges of this reality disintegrating into vacuity, or the glow of eyes glaring from the path at the edge of the dead forest.