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Mariutza

SMOOTH MOONLIGHT, SOFT AND timid as a sleeping babe's breath, seeped through the forest canopy, painting Old Man Oak's mossy beard with twisting ribbons of silver and shadow. The swamp folks were full awake now. All stoked up with joy, singing hallelujah for the tolerable coolness of another summer night. Bachelor bullfrogs barked out their steady bass against a piercing cicada threnody. Crickets and peepers and creepers hollered their praises full on top of the other, singing out to the Lord for the blessings He hath made.

It was a glorious song, filled with deep magic and considerations of awesome wonder. It made a body thankful to be alive. Squish-squashing through soft cool mud. Hop-scotching dead wood and fresh fallen branches. Pausing to look out across dark star-dusted waters where the proud Cypress sisters, skirts hitched high above dark bony knees, waded through reflections of ring-light. Swaying and sighing to the night music. The sounds of blessed freedom and sweet never-ending joy.

MARIUTZA LET LOOSE WITH a wistful sigh and felt her way through the dark forest. Purodad would be getting home soon. He was going to be mad as a dirt dauber when he learned she'd run off again.

But she couldn't just sit there in the wagon and let him lock her up. She was a proper lady now, a full-grown woman—Miss Caralee said so herself. Proper ladies didn't hold to being locked up in diddlecars. Proper ladies had work to do. Washing and cooking. Tending to the nets.

Gradually, step by step, the forest opened out into a moonlit clearing. Mari tiptoed around a sun-burned vegetable patch and ran for the cover of a gnarled old oak tree. Miss Caralee would take her side. Purodad was getting superstitious in his old age. She'd said it herself. She wouldn't stand for any more of his nonsense. That's what she called it: utter nonsense.

"Yoo-hoo! Miss Caralee?" she called out from behind the old oak. "Don't shoot. It's me, Mariutza."

She peeked out at a ramshackle hut pieced together with drift-boards from the storm. "I'm coming out now. Just me alone." Stepping out from behind the tree, she hesitated. The cook fire wasn't burning and there weren't any candlelights shining through the windows. Caralee couldn't be off visiting. It was long time past dark. Had she already gone off to bed?

"Here I am. Walking to the door!"

A scrape sounded inside the shack. The clank of metal against metal.

"Don't shoot. It's me!" Mari put some wind behind her words. Miss Caralee's eyes were sharp as stickers, but her ears were starting to wear thin.

A strong voice, dry and weathered as sun-bleached driftwood, called out through the screen. "Lands, chile. What you doin' out

the door? Night's most black as soot. Don't just stand there gawping like a catfish. Come on up!"

Mari ran up to the shack and sat down on the smooth old stump just outside the narrow door.

The screen flared bright as a match struck against the jamb post. Hollow cheeks and soft dark eyes. The flame flickered and steadied as it took hold of a tallow candle. Miss Caralee pressed it against the screen and peeped outside, squinting into the darkness like it was light.

"Your grandfather know you out this late?"

"He said he was going to lock me up. Keep me in the diddlecar till I learned some sense."

"Mmm-hmm . . ." The ancient woman sighed. "That man! What have you gone and did now?"

"I was just looking. Didn't nobody seen me. There haven't been any hunters since spring."

"Lord have mercy. Spying on the road again. Don't you have work to tend?"

"No, ma'am. I done finished it. But if Purodad locks me up, I won't be getting nothing done. He thinks he can do it all himself, but you know he can't. He's got town folk to visit. Healings to tend."

"Hush up, chile. Ain't nobody locking nobody up, but you listen to me. You a grown woman now. Time is for you to be telling *him* what to do. If you want to go running your skirts through the pluff mud, that's nobody's business but your own—so long's your work's done—but laws . . . spying on the road? I told you that myself. If Mr. Jonah say it ain't safe, it ain't safe."

"But if they don't see me—"

"You think your grandfather don't know what is? Folks all around paying him good money for his sight, and you too good to listen?"

“No, ma’am.” Mari looked down at the ground and tried to put some respectful attitude in her voice. “But I was just—”

“Just say you’re sorry and don’t do it no more. That’s all he want.”

“But, if nobody seen me—”

“*If?* That’s what that little white spot say? *If?*” Caralee jabbed a gnarled finger at the screen.

Mari caught her breath. She was pointing at her chest. Had Purodad told her? It was supposed to be a secret.

“That’s right. That little white spot on your chest. You was the one what prayed a healing? That how you know so much more’n Mr. Jonah?”

“I wasn’t saying . . .” Mari’s throat tightened, choking off her words. “I didn’t mean to . . .” Her eyes filled with tears. “I—”

“You a sweet girl. I know you don’t mean nothing by it, but you got to listen to your grandfather. Mr. Jonah’s got the sight. If he say it ain’t safe, it ain’t safe.”

“Yes’m.” Mari hung her head and blinked her tears onto the ground.

“That’s right. Maybe he ought to lock you up. Running off in the middle of the night and scaring a body half to death. That how I taught you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s right. Now get on to that fancy diddlecar wagon of yourn before he sets the hunters on you hisself.”

Mari nodded and looked up at her teacher. The old woman’s mouth was pressed firm, but her eyes still had the laugh in them. If she wasn’t too angry, maybe she’d be willing to—

“Go on. Get going. And don’t peep out of that wagon till Mr. Jonah say it’s safe.”

“Maybe if you come with me, he won’t be so—”

A scream blasted through Mari's senses, sending her staggering into the screen. Another scream. Another. They were inside her head, dozens and dozens of them, clawing and scratching like possums in a wire cage.

"Lord have mercy. What's gotten in you, chile? What you going on?"

"Don't you *hear* them?" Mari swung around and searched the shrieking darkness. The whole forest echoed with ringing silence. The frogs and peepers and creepers, they were still as the deep waters. Even the mosquitoes had left off their buzzing.

"Lord have mercy." Caralee jangled with the latch and pushed open the screen. "Come in the door, chile! It's the Badness. It's the Badness for sure!"

A hand closed around her arm and tugged her back toward the door.

"No ma'am, please. I can't!" Mari twisted free of her teacher's grasp and jerked away from the doorway. She was being ornery and obstinate and desperately wicked, but she didn't have time to put on the respect. The Badness had found the woods. She was supposed to be making for the hiding place.

"Come on, chile. This ain't no house to fear. Get in the door!" Feeble hands pawed at Mari's back. "Get in the door now!"

Another scream rattled up her spine, filling her head with the rabble of a hurricane. She weren't a baby no more! Miss Caralee didn't know anything. A real Standing didn't go inside. A real Standing wasn't supposed to be afraid!

"Chile, please." Caralee whimpered in her ear. "Come in the door. Mr. Jonah'll understand. He just want you safe . . ."

Mari twisted away and pushed across the cook yard, leaning into the dark waves crashing against her mind. She had to get to the hiding place. It was in the training. She had to get to the hiding place now!

Pale blue moonlight appeared before Mari's eyes. A patchwork of branches, bobbing up and down. The soft glow of a distant lantern set in a shuttered window. Their diddlecar! The Badness had found it!

"Purodad!" Mari broke into an all-out run. Through the garden, across the clearing, dodging in and out between the shadows of phantom trees, she leaped and twisted and splashed through the roiling blackness. Jolting moonlight flashed inside her head. Cloaked figures, maddening screams, the slap of raking branches.

The Badness! The swamp was drowning in it. Suffocating, choking, soaking deep into her soul. A dim shadow swept past her, catching her arm and spinning her around. Tangles of grasping vines, sucking mud, splashing water.

"Purodad!" The forest shifted around her. "Purodad, I'm coming!"

The weight of a hundred staring eyes pressed into her brain. They knew where she was. They would destroy her, suck the marrow from her bones. She was theirs now. Helpless and alone. There could be no escape.

Clawing at her face and hair, she threw herself to the ground, rolling over and over across the bracken. It was in her head. Pouring out from deep inside her filthy heart.

A gunshot sounded against her screams. Distant shouts.

"No!" Mari fought to her feet and stumbled forward, ripping through clinging stickers, pushing through clacking reeds. She was running now, faster and faster toward the distant light. The diddlecar pounded and jolted into view. A light jumped and flared in the window. "Purodad?"

Throwing open the door, she dove inside and rolled. Onto her knees, grasping at the swinging door, she slammed it shut and yanked down on the bolt. She scoured the interior of the wagon

with darting eyes. Her grandfather wasn't home yet? That meant he was still—

An exultant scream shook the wagon, sending Mari crashing into the floor. A chorus of answering howls jolted like lightning through her body. Purodad was out there. He was out there with *them*.

Holy One, please . . . I can't do it. A tremor shuddered up her spine, sucking the heat from her body. *I know I can't.* She climbed unsteadily onto her feet and slid back the door bolt.

Blackness pushed into the wagon, filling her mind with a muzzy haze. *Help me.* She tumbled out of the wagon and landed in a heap on the ground.

Another howl rattled into her brain. Mari's stomach seized up. She was on her hands and knees. Her stomach heaved, over and over. The Badness buzzed in her head like a swarm of cuckoo bees. Filling her, surrounding her, covering her skin with stinging pain.

Holy One, please . . . She pushed onto her feet and tottered forward. He was out there. Out there with the Badness. Her gentle, crinkly eyed grandfather! She broke into a run, faster and faster, charging through thickets, plunging through rending, tearing thorns.

Another gunshot rang out. Another and another. Flashes of sparking light.

A jolt slammed into her, knocking her onto the ground. Tongues of burning darkness licked at her skin, coiling around her arms, forcing their way into her mouth and nose. A scream convulsed her body, but the Badness wouldn't let it escape. She was drowning in it. Couldn't breathe.

A sudden explosion of blinding light ripped through the forest. Shining through her eyelids, into her skull, penetrating deep into her brain. The swamp shook beneath her, sending her

skittering across the ground. The earth was moving, tilting onto its side. Mari grabbed at a sapling, clung to it with both hands as she was tipped out over the inky blackness of the night sky far below.

The light faded slowly and finally winked out. Suddenly the ground was beneath her again and the sky was back in its rightful place. Silence rang like a bell. Its throbbing echoes reverberated in her ears. Something had happened. Something deep and awesome in its all-consuming terror. She rolled onto her back and lay, panting and trembling, at the bottom of the deep moonlit night.

“Purodad?” Her whisper shouted against the silence.

A thud sounded in the distance. The crackle of dry leaves.

“Puro—” Her voice caught in her throat as a rustle shook the undergrowth nearby. Something was moving toward her. Something big.

Mari rolled over and tried to climb onto her feet, but her legs were heavy as wet shrimp nets. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t lift herself from the covering weeds.

A gurgling rasp sounded from the edge of a clump of trees. It was getting closer. Mari struggled onto her knees, but she could only stare. A low shadow was creeping through the foliage. Panting breaths. Sputtering gasps.

The figure broke through the leaves and collapsed at the base of the trees.

“Purodad!” Mari jumped up and stumbled toward her grandfather. “Purodad!” Her eyes filled with tears. She collapsed in a heap at his side and clutched at his hand.

A dark stain slowly spread across the old man’s stomach. He was coughing now. Gasping for breath.

“No!” Mari pushed off the ground and knelt at his side. “Stay right here! Miss Caralee’ll know what to do.”

“Quiet!” her grandfather barked. “Listen to me!”

“But Miss Caralee . . .” Mari clasped his hand to her chest. “I’ll be right back. She’ll pray a healing. You’ll see. Everything’s going to be fine. I’ll be—”

“Listen to me! This is my time. Nothing can stop it now.”

“Grandfather, no! We’ll pray—”

“You’re no granddaughter of mine!” the old man rasped. “No relation at all. Hear?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—” A sob wracked her body, sealing off her throat.

“No relation at all.” The man’s face tightened and his head lolled back onto the ground.

“I’m sorry,” Mari blurted through her tears. “I tried to hide. I didn’t think they seen me. I—”

A wheezing sigh cut her off. Her grandfather’s eyes were still open. His lips were trembling. He was trying to talk.

Mari leaned closer and shook the tears from her eyes. His breath was coming in short gurgling gasps. Finally he took a hiccupping breath and let it out in a long sigh.

“Find him. I want you to promise me. Find him first. Then find the others.”

“Find who? Miss Caralee?”

“Shhhh . . .” Purodad’s face tightened into a grimace and gradually relaxed with another sigh. “Dig the grave yourself. Round. Two and a half feet wide. Hear?”

“No!” Mari shook her head. “You’re not going to die. You can’t. You’re the prophet—”

“Hurry. They’re gone now, but they’ll be back soon.” His eyelids fluttered and slowly drifted shut. “Bury me standing. I must be buried standing.”