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The Blackberry Pickers

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The Blackberry Pickers

Author Bio

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The Blackberry Pickers

Once, when night blanketed the forest in cool serenity, and the moon and the stars offered the only meager illumination, Adan forgot her father's warnings and followed the little wisps deep into the forest. They were candle-fire blue and bright as the brilliant heart-star of the great dog. Thick branches draped in autumn-painted leaves blocked any sky-bound light, so she followed the only lanterns to be found ever deeper into the trees.

In the distance, through the maze of tree trunks and knobby roots, a soft glow appeared. It was dim, but it dazzled her night-accustomed eyes. Adan pulled her pleather jacket a little tighter, her cable-knit fingerless gloves doing little to keep out the brisk October night.

The light grew as she approached; she kept her eyes locked on it, no longer needing the wisps' guidance. Intricate details peaked through the branches, offering promises from another world.

Adan stumbled through the last of the sentinel trees and froze, staring in awe.

The lake in the center of the clearing glistened with the song of dying stars and infant galaxies. In the center of the lake was a palace of moon silver, thin patterns curling across its delicate facade. Although it seemed to have no warm fire lanterns, it gleamed with an icy flame's shaking dance.

"Hello."

She started. And then she saw the girl to whom that voice belonged. She froze.

The girl was made of night: dark and limitless, full of melodies that the morning sun would chase away. Her eyes were the same shade of blue as the midnight sky, and the girl stared right back at her from near the edge of the water.

"Who are you?" Adan asked, watching the night-girl.

“I am what I am,” the night-girl laughed, gesturing for her to come closer, “Now, come here.”

Adan sat down criss-cross by the night-girl. The night-girl examined her, and Adan blushed, knowing that she was a cheap imitation of the ethereal, locked into mere mortal humanity since birth. “Your hair is fire,” the night-girl said, after a long pause.

“Yeah,” Adan tucked some of her curls, the same color as a bonfire’s licking flames, a gift from her fiery father, behind her ear.

“But your eyes are water,” the night-girl continued.

“Yeah.”

“Are you human?” the night-girl phrased the words as a question but said them as a statement.

“Yes. Are you?” she asked, but the night-girl just looked at her. In the back of her spine, she could feel the primordial part of her that still feared darkness quake, but the rest of her, the parts of her that was the product of millions of years of evolution and change, knew not to be afraid.

“You’re not supposed to be able to come here,” the night-girl’s brow furrowed. “How did you find me?”

“I just followed the wisps. They lead me straight here,” Adan looked around, at the castle of constellations and the lake that reflected more stars than she had ever seen. It was unlike anything that she had ever known. “Where is here, exactly?”

The night-girl looked around with a small, sad smile, “My home.”

“It’s beautiful,” awe ached in Adan’s voice.

“I suppose.”

“What’s the matter with it?” she asked.

“Nothing’s the matter with it, particularly, it’s just that it’s the only place I’ve ever been.”

She stared, “You’ve never left? Not... not ever?” Her mind raced, remembering all sorts of wonderful things: screaming school spirit at Friday night football games, and admiring her sister’s art at the local community center, and going on dinner dates with friends. She remembered the freedom of horseback and the wafting scent of fried-everything from state fairs. She remembered all the things that made life worthwhile.

The night-girl shook her head, “Not ever.”

Adan stood up, brushing her jeans clean of the earth. She offered a hand, “Come with me?”

The night-girl looked at her hand, and then back at the palace, “I don’t think I can.”

“You said it yourself; I’m not even supposed to be here. Why not try?”

The night-girl smiled, “All right, then.”

Adan grinned, “Let’s go.” She pulled the night-girl to her feet and led her to the edge of the clearing.

The night-girl placed her palm on one of the bordering trees and just said, “Please?”

A tight wave of silver passed through the trees, shaking them from the roots up. Adan wrapped her hand even tighter around the night-girl’s, and then Adan led the girl who was not quite human out of the forest, holding on to her in tight defiance. It took less time to reach her house on the edge of the woods than it had taken to reach the clearing with the palace and the girl, and the full moon still hugged the eastern horizon, offering bright light in a cloudless sky.

“This way,” the very human Adan said, leading the way to her rusty green pickup.

They got in her truck and drove too fast over miles of twisting asphalt peppered with pot holes and past corn fields that swayed in a gentle breeze. She rolled the windows all the way down, and the night-girl hung her arm lazily out it, grasping at the air as it slipped between her

fingers. She turned up the music until it was so loud that it drowned out everything but the whipping wind. And they laughed, raucous ecstasy filling their lungs.

When they finally reached the field, she pulled over and parked on the grass. “Come on,” Adan said, already jumping out of her truck.

The night-girl leapt from the truck with unparalleled grace, and paused by the door, her hand resting on the window. “What do I?” the night-girl trailed off, looking to Adan for guidance in this new world.

“Follow me?” Adan offered, and then turned and sprinted into the field.

The night-girl followed, and soon they were chasing each other through neat rows of blackberry bushes. When Adan finally caught the night-girl, she whirled around and sent them both toppling backwards. Their joy bubbled over, uncontained elation filling every breathy giggle.

Their laughter finally died down as the bright full moon reached its zenith, illuminating both the ripened berries and their grins still stretched far too wide. Adan showed the night-girl the deep purple of the sweetest berries, and soon, their fingers and lips were stained purple-red, berry juice gluing their fingers together. They sat down and dug their nails into the dirt.

She couldn't stop staring in awe at the night-girl, a girl of twinkling stars and shifting planets. Their eyes locked for a moment, before she looked down and away from the night-girl's intense gaze. Adan let herself fall on to her back and stare at the stars. The night-girl fell to the ground beside her and tucked herself into the crook of Adan's elbow. They stared at the sky in silence for a long time, letting the song of the stars echo in their irises.

“Most of them are dead now.”

“What?” Adan asked, turning her head to look back at the night-girl.

“I’ve watched the stars come and go, but the best ones always die long before their light reaches us,” the night-girl was locked in a wistful memory. “But their light still does. It carries on, even after its maker is gone.”

Adan looked up at the stars, pockmarks of a dying universe. “That’s so... sad.”

“Maybe,” the night-girl said. “But I’ve always thought about what kind of courage it takes, to know that you’re creating something not for today, and not for yourself. To give completely and know that you will get nothing in return.”

“Like a legacy?” Adan asked.

The night-girl nodded, and they lapsed back into silence. They watched the stars move overhead, picking out constellations almost subconsciously; there was the guiding tail of the little bear, and the belt of the hunter, and the red eye of the boar. The seven sisters twinkled bright, and the night-girl’s words echoed in her mind.

She wasn’t sure what the signal was, but somehow, they both knew that the night had come to an end. They stood up, Adan’s chin bumping the night-girl’s forehead and inspiring laughter at their ineptitude. It quieted quickly, hanging in the still air. The girls held hands as they walked back through the labyrinth of blackberry bushes, towards the western moon dipping over the horizon. They climbed back into Adan’s car, and she drove them home.

This time, Adan drove fifteen miles per hour under the speed limit. The night-girl had her face turned out the window, catching the breeze as it came, chin resting on her hand. The other she used to hold on tight to the human girl. “What is this place?” the night girl finally asked, looking out over the rolling fields.

“Hm?” Adan glanced away from the endless road to look at the night-girl. “We’re in Kentucky.”

“It’s so beautiful.”

“That’s Kentucky for ya,” Adan chuckled. “Prettier than people give it credit for.”

“Kentucky,” the night-girl repeated, tasting the way the word fell on her lips, head still turned out the window.

The sky began to lighten behind them, but Adan refused to speed up; she just continued at forty-five, defying the passage of time.

Her headlights illuminated her family’s run-down farmhouse on the edge of the woods, and an ache formed in the back of her throat. Adan pulled into the gravel driveway and turned off the ignition. The car rumbled to silence.

The two girls sat in the car for only another moment, but it could have been a lifetime. They finally opened their doors and hopped out of the car, and they walked towards the edge of the woods. Adan didn’t want to break the silence, but when neither girl had said anything by the time they reached the first trees, she knew she had to.

“I can’t follow you, can I?” something in her bones knew it was true before the night-girl could say anything.

“No, no, you can’t,” the night-girl’s voice was melancholy. “It’s time for me to go home.”

Adan was at a loss for words, but after a moment she managed, “I don’t want you to go.”

The night-girl leaned in and kissed her. It was soft, and gentle, and long, the kind of kiss where you breathe into each other’s very existence. When they finally broke apart, the sun was peaking its first rays over the edge of the horizon.

“Thank you. For everything,” tears traced the night-girl’s cheeks, and she didn’t bother to hide them.

Their foreheads rested against each other for another infinite moment, and then they broke apart. The night-girl squeezed Adan's hands, and then let go, letting them fall back to her side. The night-girl turned and walked into the forest, picking her way through fallen branches and upturned limestone. Adan watched for a long time, but the night-girl never looked back. Eventually, Adan turned away from the forest and back towards the east, towards the sun, and watched it paint the sky a million shades of red and gold.