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Night Magic

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Author Bio

Jackie McMahon '21 is an English major with a creative writing concentration and a history minor. In addition to The Mercury, she writes for The Gettysburgian newspaper. In her free time, Jackie likes to spend too much time on her literary-centric Tumblr blog, obsess over fictional characters, and pet all the cats she possibly can.

Night Magic

JACKIE MCMAHON

Disa woke suddenly in the darkness of night with a scream lodged in her throat and blood on her sheets.

The girl bolted up on her pallet, trying to catch her breath. The nightmare had been so real, so lifelike, that it took her a moment to remember where she was. She threw back the blankets and her horror only returned to her. Her thighs were sticky with blood, looking black in the darkness, and it had stained her nightgown and bed as well. This had never happened to her before. Mother told her it was coming, but she'd hoped...

Where was Mother? Disa squinted and looked around, suddenly cognizant that Mother was not asleep in bed. She could see Father's large lump of a form under the covers, hear his loud snores, but there was no one beside him. Disa saw that her brothers and sisters were all sound asleep, but she realized that Eydis was not to be found either. A young woman about five years older than Disa, she'd come to them three years ago when Father brought her back from his expedition in a land across the sea. Sometimes when she braided Disa's hair, Eydis would tell her of where she was born, where the land was green and flat, flowers bloomed in the spring, and the men spoke a strange tongue Disa did not know. Her name had not been Eydis then, but when Mother insisted that she be freed, Eydis chose to stay with them and take a new name. Now she lived with them and worshipped their gods, and always seemed to be by Mother's side. "Girls do not have many choices in this world, Disa," Mother said to her at the time. "And I do my part to give them one whenever possible." Disa had not known what Mother meant then, but now she thought she did.

Quietly Disa slipped from their hut and out into the cool night. She wished she had remembered her shoes, but did not turn back. The village was still and seemingly lifeless, and the moon hung full in the sky. Disa felt its light on her face. Father told them that there was a man in the moon, but Mother had laughed and assured Disa that it was a woman, the goddess of the moon. "The sun is a god," she said. "And he rules the day, but the night is ruled by women, and they are always watching you."

Disa wished the goddesses could tell her what to do now. She

looked around and that was when she swore she heard something, the sound of a voice. A feminine voice. "Mother?" Disa whispered softly, even though she knew there was no chance her mother could hear her. There was a faint light emanating from one of the huts at the other end of the village, which Disa knew belonged to Helga. Old Helga was the widow of the last *jarl*, who died before Disa was born, and Disa knew little about Helga except that she was very old and very wrinkly, with eyes that seemed to see all. Disa and Trigve often tried to guess how old she was. Trigve thought Helga had to be a hundred, but Disa wondered if the old woman had somehow lived forever. Still, she was a woman, so perhaps she would know what to do about the blood. Cautiously, Disa made her way to Helga's hut.

The closer Disa got, the louder the noises became. Disa realized that it was not one woman's voice, but many, chanting in unison. She tiptoed towards the open doorway of Helga's hut, peeking out in hopes that she would not be seen. She remained crouched behind the doorframe, staring in starry-eyed awe. There were many women in billowing white nightgowns, holding hands and dancing in two concentric circles. In their hands were long strings of yarn which they passed between them, so that the cords became tangled and convoluted. Disa could not make out the words they were saying and she wondered if they were a blessing, or a prayer, or a curse.

In the center an old woman had her face pointed upwards, waving her arms and muttering to herself, waving a large wooden staff carved with runes in one of her hands. *Helga*. Disa's eyes searched the circles, but she could not make out the women's faces, which only appeared to her in snatches as they continued to circle Helga. In the firelight, Disa suddenly spotted a glint of reddish hair. *Eydis*? She was the only woman in their village with hair like that. Uncle said that red hair was an ill omen. It was ironic, considering Eydis was the name of the goddess of good luck. *But what was Eydis doing here?*

Disa didn't know why, but she felt like this was something she wasn't meant to see. She stumbled backwards, but she must have made a noise, because suddenly Eydis's red head turned towards her and their eyes met. Eydis's face lit up with recognition. "Disa?" All the other women stopped to look at her and Disa spotted Mother, in her nightgown and holding the now knotted yarn. Even Helga in the center turned to stare, lowering her staff, and Disa had never felt so embarrassed. "What are you doing here? Oh Disa, you're bleeding."

That was effectively the end of whatever it was Disa had witnessed. The others left and Mother sat Disa down inside the hut, while Eydis soaked cloths in a basin of water to clean her up. Helga too

remained, but she said nothing, only watching Disa with a penetrating gaze that made her feel as if she'd done something wrong. "Am I in trouble?"

Mother shook her head. "No, my darling. You're not in trouble."
"What were you all doing?"

The women looked at each other, and then Mother glanced away. "You're a woman now, Disa. I'll have to show you how to clean up your blood. It is nothing to worry about. My mother taught me the same thing when I was about your age."

Disa's lower lip quivered. She could hear Uncle's voice in her mind. *Disa will be a fine woman, like her aunt...* "I do not want to be a woman."

"Why not?"

"Because..." Disa trailed off. Eydis wrung out one of the cloths and began to scrub Disa's thighs. The blood came away easier than Disa had expected. "Does this mean I have to marry Uncle now?"

Uncle was not Disa's real uncle, but he'd been married to Aunt, Mother's sister, and so she had to call him that. Uncle was the chieftain of their village, and the other men always said that he was strong and brave. It was Uncle who led the expedition where Father found Eydis and brought her back to them. But Disa thought that Uncle was old and strange. She didn't like the way he looked at her. As for Aunt, Disa did not remember much of her, except that she had been very beautiful, with golden blonde hair just like Disa's and Mother's, but there had always been something in her air. She was beautiful, and gentle, and kind, but sad. So profoundly sad. When she died, Disa was there to comfort Trigve and wipe his tears. Uncle did not weep though. He said he needed a new wife, so he could have a new son. Disa wasn't supposed to hear that, but she did.

Mother brushed her hair back gently. "Why would you ask that Disa?"

"Because I heard Uncle talking to Father. He said that when I become a woman, he wants me to marry him. Do I have to? He is so old and ugly." Disa did not want to get married, but if she had to, she would want to marry someone sweet and gentle like Trigve.

There was a moment of silence and Disa winced as Eydis began to scrub her thighs more strongly, even after the blood was gone. It was hard enough to break the skin and Disa's flesh was rubbed raw and pink. "Eydis," Mother said. "Careful, you'll hurt her."

Eydis looked up at her, green eyes blazing with fury. "I'll hurt her? She is but three-and-ten. If he tries to touch her, I swear I will -"

"Eydis." Helga said soft yet strong. Disa realized she'd never

heard the old woman speak before. "That is enough." Eydis frowned and continued to scrub, but now her touch was more gentle.

Helga touched Disa's shoulder. "Can you stand for a moment child?" Disa followed orders, but her legs were shaky. Her nightgown was still stained with blood, not white and pristine like Helga's. "Come, look at the night sky with me."

Standing outside the hut with Helga, Disa looked up. It was a cloudless night, with a full moon and stars beyond counting. "It's very beautiful," she told Helga, thinking that was what the old woman wanted to hear, but Helga only chuckled.

"And what else?"

Disa bit her lip and thought. "There's a woman in the moon," she answered, thinking of what Mother told her. "And her light illuminates the night."

"That's right." Helga's wrinkly hands squeezed Disa's shoulders as she knelt down beside her. "The goddess of the moon was forced into an arranged marriage too. Her father, the sky god, wanted her to marry an earth god to unite their kingdoms. But the goddess did not want a loveless marriage, and so she called upon her sisters: the goddess of the stars, and the goddess of the night. Together they used their magic to turn her into the moon, and they placed her in the sky. There no man could ever touch her again. We are all the goddesses' daughters, sisters, nieces, granddaughters. When one of us is in need, we simply call upon them, and they will answer."

"That is what you were doing?"

"Yes, child. Now you are old enough to be a part. There is a great power in you."

Disa wrinkled her nose. "So...you can change the future?"

Helga shook her head. "Not change, but...see. The goddesses grant us knowledge. We must trust in ourselves, in our sisterhood, to know what to do with that knowledge." She pointed one bony finger at the moon. "Look, and tell me what you see."

Disa turned back to the sky and narrowed her eyes. Looking at the moon, Disa saw nothing other than the same moon she'd looked upon every night of her life. She wanted to tell Helga that she didn't see anything, that there was nothing there, but then...

Disa saw, and Disa smiled.

The carousing in the mead hall was raucous and Disa sat perfectly still in her seat, feeling constricted in the new dress Father had

made for this occasion. Her plate in front of her remained untouched, the food long having gone cold, while next to her Trigve devoured with abandon. Disa looked around. Eydis was seated at the opposite end of the hall with other servants, and Helga was nowhere to be found. At the high table, Uncle was seated in the center chair, laughing at some man's bawdy joke. Father sat on his right side, forcing himself to smile, while Mother was next to Father, looking resplendent. She caught Disa staring and the corners of her lips turned up into a small smile as she nodded at Disa.

"When you marry my father," Trigve said, bringing Disa back to the present moment. "Does that mean you will become my new mother? I don't think I would like that. You were my friend first."

Disa smiled. "No Trigve, I am not going to marry your father."

"Good, because I don't want you to," Trigve continued, brushing sandy hair out of his eyes. "And if he tries to take you, I will tell him he's stupid, and fight him. I don't care that he's my father, I'll do it for you."

"You are sweet to say so," she leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth, which made Trigve's face flush red. He looked over her shoulder and suddenly began to stammer.

"Father, I - I was only - "

Uncle ignored him. Looming over Disa now, she was reminded of just how *large* he was. His greying hair had many little braids and ornaments, and the hair on his broad chest was visible over the low collar of his tunic. It stopped just where his beard began. At his waist a small axe was sheathed, and when he placed a hand on her shoulder, it was rough with callouses. "Disa, my darling." The term of endearment felt wrong in his gravelly voice, which always sounded like he had a sore throat. "Why do you sit here during your own betrothal celebration? Come, have a drink with me." It was not a request.

Disa turned to Trigve. "I'll be back," she said, before following Uncle to the dais.

"Ahhh," one of the other men said when he saw Disa approach in her red dress. Father told her that red was the most expensive color, and that when everyone saw her there would be no doubt she was important. "What a lovely little daughter you have, Birger. If the *jarl* were not marrying her, I would." The other men all roared with laughter, and Father tried to play along, not finding the comment funny but lacking the strength to object. Mother lifted her goblet to her lips to take a long gulp.

Uncle called for attention and the hall fell silent as all eyes turned to look at the *jarl*. Disa's eyes searched the crowd for Eydis.

The older girl's eyes looked right at her. Uncle lifted his own goblet into the air. "To my beautiful bride-to-be," he proclaimed. "There is no other girl in this village so good." Father looked at Uncle's back with sad eyes. Mother did not look at all. The men in the hall began to chant Uncle's name, Disa's now being strung along with his.

Uncle bent down to Disa's level and handed her the cup, so she could take the first sip. "How about a kiss?" he asked.

The mead was smooth and sweet as honey on Disa's tongue. She stood on her tiptoes to kiss Uncle's rough cheek, and the men yelled and clapped in approval. But in the chaos, Disa's lips found her uncle's ear, and she whispered for only him to hear. "I shall never marry you."

Uncle took the goblet from her and pulled back, confusion etched on his face. "What was that?"

"I said, I shall never marry you."

Uncle's eyebrows knitted together as his forehead wrinkled. "What?" he laughed. "But of course you will."

"I shall never marry you," she repeated. "Because I saw you die."

"Excuse me?"

Disa smiled. "Oh my uncle, I saw you die this very night."

Uncle stared at her for a moment, and then his lips parted as he laughed again. "A child's imagination," he said, paying her words no more thought, and then he lifted the goblet to his lips. Disa still smiled, and waited.

Uncle drank long and deep enough to drain the cup, but then suddenly a strange look crossed his face. The goblet crashed to the floor with a loud noise and Uncle was in a moment hunched over the table, a hand wrapped around his throat as he wheezed, his face turning red, then white. His other hand reached out desperately, accidentally spilling the contents of the high table all over the floor. Plates fell with a crash and full cups of mead poured down the table. For a few moments everyone stood in shock, and then they began to scream.

"He's choking!"

"Someone do something!"

"The *jarl* can't breathe!"

Several of the men raced to get to Uncle, one of them grabbing him from behind while another stuck his fingers down his throat. Father half-rose out of his seat, but then just stood there, his eyes moving back and forth from one person to another. Mother stayed seated, perfectly still, save for her hands which were now clenching the arms of her chair hard enough for her knuckles to turn white.

Disa only took a step back and watched as Uncle went blue, his

body going lax and collapsing into one of the men's arms.

Men were screaming. Women were crying. "He's dead! The *jarl*, he's dead!" Trigve had gotten up, his jaw slacked from shock. Disa saw that Eydis and some of the other women were staring in stone-faced silence. Disa's eyes narrowed. At the very back of the hall, an old, wrinkled woman dressed in white was staring, a peaceful look on her face, her hands clasped in front of her. *Where did she come from?* Disa had not seen her earlier, and she was far away from the door. There was no way she could've gotten back there and not walked past Disa.

From across the mead hall, Disa and Helga's eyes met. And then, one of Helga's closed in a wink.