

A WITCH BY  
ANY OTHER NAME



## **A Witch by Any Other Name**

*by James Thomasos*

### Hushpuppy

There was a scarecrow standing quietly in front of me.

And the first one to break the silence... was it.

"...Why...?" It demanded weakly in a choked, raspy voice.

"No profound reason, I was on my way into town and I thought you looked lonely."

"But why... give me... life?"

"Oh! That's temporary, trust me. You had your arms wide open, so you looked like you were inviting me in for a hug... plus, you looked like you had something to say! So now you're like this until I leave."

"Please... leave..."

"Are you sure there isn't something you want to get off of your chest? Maybe you just needed one hug? What about two?" The scarecrow continued to stare at me - maybe it was befuddled, it was hard to tell - in as deep a thought as it could manage with its newfound, albeit ephemeral, sentience.

"I think... I would like... to scream."

"Wonderful! Come on! Bring it in!" I walked up to the scarecrow and embraced it once more. This time, it embraced me back and began to scream, and scream, and scream. It cried tears of grain and sputtered ash as I held it tight. What a lonely life, that of a scarecrow; not so different from the life of a traveling merchant. Although after a couple centuries now, I was pretty well used to it.

Poor scarecrow.

It had been a few moments, or perhaps a few minutes now and the scarecrow was still screaming, "There-there. It will be okay. You won't remember a single thing when I leave." At that he stopped his existential keening and pulled away from me to 'look' at me with empty eyes.

"...Truly?"

"Truly! There is no Life for you without my magic." The scarecrow's torn face twisted into something resembling a grin.

“Thank you, I-” I ended its short life mid-sentence. I thought the perfect moment to freeze in time would be while it wore such an honest smile.

“Bye now, Smiling Scarecrow of Deurmout!”

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I stopped in front of a sad-looking old sign that was unfortunately very, very wrong. I hadn't been around these parts in about a century or so... I think. The town had since grown in scale and changed its name to something irrelevant. Deurmout was Deurmout and by the Primordial Elementals someone here hopefully still made that lamb stew. Decade after decade I had tried local cuisines across this and neighboring countries, but nothing stuck with me quite like this stuff. I couldn't even get it to come out right myself; cooking being a chore that required a bit more sense of timing than I had anymore.

I shook my head and willed the giant dodo bird I was riding to continue moving in the direction of the town. To pass the time during the last leg of this particular trip, I had hung a rope swing from the beak of a large dodo and I sat in it, kicking my feet and enjoying the haphazard swaying as it trotted across innumerable hills. While most humans stuck to dirt or stone paths for fear of stumbling upon a Fae Mound, a Witch like myself was rarely concerned with such passive illusions. The title of Witch - after all - implied the willing consumption of a Fae.

Suffice to say, I had had a few... more or less.

“Ah.” I commented to the swift-footed, flightless bird that I had appropriated from the wild, “There it is, put me down over there and make yourself scarce.” I pointed to a bend in the road where a quaint welcome sign hung from a crooked post. The bird followed its commands efficiently, setting me down before goofily bending its neck all the way back to pluck the load off its back. It set my armoire down next me before scampering off into the hills from whence it came.

I looked at the town around the bend and then regarded the armoire next to me dubiously. The town was visible, but still probably a kilometer or two away. I had been hoping not to frighten any uninitiated townsfolk with my dodo mount, but perhaps I should have gotten a bit closer before abandoning it. However... The proper entrance was critical in situations where no one may be left alive to remember you. I reached behind me to the brim of my large, pointed, floppy hat where hung a dozen perfectly healthy leaves from strings. The leaves hummed as I plucked a triplet leaves and they began to float straight up into the sky, anchored in place by the strings between my fingers. I distributed the strings' loose ends across the top of the armoire, figuring that since the leaves were now floating, a few of them attached to something heavy would make the wardrobe float.

And as ever, Magic made it so!

I bent down to grab a short length of chain that hung off the side of the armoire for this particular situation and started down the path into no-longer-Deurmout.

## Mayor Eski Alhambra

Hungry earth embrace and entomb me. **It** is actually happening in my lifetime.

Shit.

The town of Montatia (Formerly Known as Deurmout) was a town of many strange quirks. For one thing, it was standard practice in town for all legal and commercial documents to refer to a not the previous name of the town, but the name it had before the previous name of the town. On a related note: we had an overgrown piece of land near the town center that was never to be built upon. Which was unfortunate, because it was a prime location - commercially speaking - and it would be wonderful to have a nice tavern right across from town hall. And to top it all off: the oldest, most highly guarded, and valuable secret was a frustratingly simple stew recipe.

All of these backend, standard operating procedures were revealed to me when I had been elected to my position. A list of oddly specific rituals and potential scenarios that all had their roots in a year-long interaction with 'A Witch Called Hushpuppy'. According to local legend, she rolled into Deurmout (Currently Known as Montatia) one day carrying a floating wardrobe, pulled a house out of it, and began selling magical items of extraordinary power to whomever could afford her prices. Word quickly spread far and wide, and soon wealthy patrons of all types began showing up to try to bargain with the Witch.

My secretary - Isaiah - had burst into a meeting I was having with a few of the elder merchants of the town that headed up the general financial council. We were all initially struck by the audacity and discourtesy, but I stopped short of rebuking him when I saw his face; an amazing balance of both fear and excitement across his countenance.

"The... **Witch**... Is... Here!" He gasped, out of breath from apparently sprinting from halfway across town while out to pick up our lunch. There was a moment of silence as myself and the men and women in the room with me exchanged disbelieving glances... But when it finally sunk in, our meeting wordlessly ended prematurely as I scrambled over to a cabinet near my desk. I fumbled with the key that I always wore around my neck. From it, I pulled out a polished wooden case with a handle, locked the cabinet back up, and ran out the door. The merchants had already vacated the building, probably thanking their immense good fortune that they were likely the first proprietors to know that A Witch Called Hushpuppy had finally returned to Montatia (Formerly Known as Deurmout).

I had heard many tales of A Witch Called Hushpuppy from my grandfather when I was a little girl. He himself had been a young man when she had shown up, "She showed up out of nowhere, all perfectly smooth bronze skin and floaty hair that resembled a soap bubble both in sheen and colour. That girl would pull the brim of her bigass floppy hat down over her face if you complimented her too much. And that Witch had green eyes that seemed to bore right through your Coating, but that perfect smile of hers made it worth it. But don't be fooled! She was a deplorable woman who could drink any man or woman under the table, and has no respect for a

human's need to rest!" He could rant about her for hours, all sorts of little traits and quirks that he loved to mention. I imagine much of it was exaggerated.

My grandfather definitely had a bit of a crush.

I exited the town hall and was greeted by a large crowd excitedly and fearfully whispering amongst themselves that had gathered in a wide circle around a bench in the town square. I pushed through the crowd and was shocked to see the almost 10 meter berth the crowd was giving the figure sitting at a bench in the shadow of a floating armoire that they kept tethered by a small chain in hand. As I broke out of the crowd and inside the circle, a wave of murmurs ran through the gathered folk, everyone obviously excited to see how I would handle this situation. I took a deep breath and made a steady approach towards the woman who sat at the bench, kicking her feet playfully and bobbing her head from side to side to some silent tune.

It was only when I got close that I understood the apprehensive distance that the crowd was keeping from the Witch. As I came within a couple of meters of her, I saw that the only feature that even remotely resembled my grandfather's description of her was her bronze skin and an oversized, pointy yet floppy hat. But other than that, she looked nothing like either he or any of the old documents I had in my possession had described. I mean, I knew a century was a long time, intellectually speaking... But... I swallowed past the fearful lump in my throat and reminded myself that this 'person' was supposed to be friendly.

She stood up and took a few steps forward to meet me. The first trait that stood out were her eyes. They were completely black with the exception of bright - far, far too bright - blue irises. Her hair was dark blue and haphazardly cut into a medium length bob with flat bangs that she was clearly doing herself with little regard for how it looked. She offered her right hand to me and - looking down - I saw that while she had fairly small hands, her fingertips were a bit too long as well as blackened, as if they had been burnt. I grasped her wrist and felt her uncomfortably long fingers curl around my own as I gave it a single strong shake and offered her the most sincere smile I could muster. Her eyes widened slightly and she gave me a large grin, which might have been endearing, if her teeth were not all sharpened into canine points, almost like one of those large sea sharks that I once ate at a fancy capital meeting.

I cleared my throat briefly as she stared at me with a frozen smile, "Ah... Um... You are A Witch Called Hushpuppy, yes? It is an... honor to finally be able to meet you; I am the Mayor of this wonderful town, Eski Alhambra. Our illustrious history is in no small part thanks to you!" She continued to stare at me - unmoving - as I loosened my grip, she maintained hers for a few more awkward seconds.

"...Yes! I am A Witch Called Hushpuppy! T'would be a tad esoteric to say the whole title every time. But do what you want! Also... this IS Deurmont, correct?"

"Yes of course this Deurmont! Anyhow, if you would please follow me, I will escort you to your plot!" I confirmed quickly, glancing every so often down at her hand that still grasped my wrist.



“My plot?! Oh my... I did not realize I was already part of the narrative! I don’t even really have a plan! Yikes!” She joked playfully as she released my wrist, which now tingled aggressively, as if I had smacked my funny bone on a table. Briefly focusing my PsyEn on opening my Third Eye, I saw what I suspected: A very, very slight corrosion of my Coating where the Witch had grabbed me. It was not an even remotely dangerous amount of Magical interference, but it was still unsettling that she subconsciously oozed enough Magical radiation to damage a Coating at all.

How many Fae had she eaten, I wonder?

I walked across the town square and she followed me with her floating wardrobe, bare feet gently touching down on the cobblestone a few steps behind me. We stopped in front of the overgrown but otherwise empty plot of land adjacent to the town square, and I turned hesitantly to face her once more.

She stared impassively past me.

Oh no.

“...This... is your plot... that the town has reserved for you all this time...” I explained weakly, gesturing to the grass behind me. Suddenly, her eyes widened and she cupped her left cheek with her free hand.

“Ooooooooooh! You meant a plot of **land**! Not the plot of a story! Oh wow, I was wondering how you were going to lead me to something so abstract without even a drop of magic! Wow... this definitely makes a lot more sense!” She seemed genuinely shocked and fairly airheaded... But there was an uncomfortable disconnect between the tone of her voice and the emotions she appeared to be trying to convey. It was as if she were speaking to a child and trying **very** hard to sound impressed in order to spare their feelings.

“I hope this is enough. A gift from our ancestors to you. Please accept it!”

“On the contrary, this might be too big! Let’s see... HUP!” She suddenly shouted as she wound the arm anchoring her wardrobe back and pitched it forward, as if throwing a ball as hard as she could. Despite the apparent strength behind the throw, the wardrobe floated lazily through the air, pausing 4 or 5 meters above the exact center. I looked back at her and saw the crowd slowly meandering closer; I held up my hand and shook my head at them. If Magic was about to occur then it would be best for everyone to stand back and ensure that their Coatings were strong enough to protect them from the Magical fallout.

### Hushpuppy

There seemed to be a bit of a crowd.

Oof. It would be pretty awkward if my house weren’t big enough to fill this plot.

Yards are nice, but I have no need for such a thing and they tend to largely be a way for the rich to flex on the poor. If you are going to have so much land, you should **grow** something on it! And I won't be staying long enough to tend to a really *meaty* garden, if you know what I mean.

I stepped up to the edge of the plot of **land** that was apparently mine. It was a cute gesture; kind of like putting a little sign that says, 'Welcome!' on your door. I clapped my hands three times since I used three leaves to hold my armoire aloft. The leaves detached - of course - and the armoire fell to the ground with a heavy crash, landing perfectly balanced on its four legs. The Lady Who Was Called the Mayor flinched next to me and I decided that I ought to explain so she wouldn't be scared.

"...So the next part is really important, you see, because there is a lot of something in the wardrobe, but a lot of nothing outside of the wardrobe," As I explained the nature of that which was true, I allowed the Magic that existed within and without me to flow more directly, and less wobbly, "This sort of Magic is very, very simple, you see. Because you're really only changing two things: a lot of something into a lot of nothing and a lot of nothing into a lot of something! And since there is plenty of nothing to go around AND plenty of something to go around, the backlash will probably be minimal!" As I concluded my explanation, Magic buoyed to the cadence of my desire and with a loud sonic *Pop*, the something that filled my wardrobe replaced the nothing outside of it with the something that was within and the nothing became full of something.

"Understand? Simple, right?"

"...S-sure..."

"Wonderful!" I'm such a good teacher. I stepped back to check on the deployment of my home and saw to my great horror that my house was indeed a meter-ish off in every direction from filling the plot. Since such an amount of land had been allotted to me, it only seemed right that I fill the entire space. I stood in front of the left-front corner of my house and planted my hands on either face. I took a deep breath and reminded the house that since it was **mine**, it had to do what I wanted it to. It obeyed and slid diagonally until it was flush with the boundaries of the back right corner of the plot of **land**. With that taken care of, it was easy enough to dig my fingers into the two faces of my house and pull them out, expanding it at a constant ratio.

Boom. Nailed it. Perfectly flush with my allotted plot of **land**.

There was a scattering of 'Ooo's and 'Ahh's from behind me, and I realized that the crowd was still there and totally impressed.

I **am** pretty impressive, aren't I?

I turned to the Lady Called the Mayor, "Would you like to come in? I probably definitely have tea." She gave me a thing and it is **very** important that one pays their debts.

Especially when you're a Witch.

"I will have to pass. There is much work to be done since you are here, you see."

"Ah! I bet! Hey do you guys still make the **Famous Stew of Deurmont**? It is legitimately all I wish to eat right now." Oh please let it be so. If I could Magic this stuff into existence I would have done so, so pl-

"Yes, of course! I will make sure it is being produced at all times while you are here!"

!!!

Oh. Oh this is so exciting.

"Could I have a large pot delivered every day when the customers begin to awaken? I will make it worth your while."

"Of co-"

I gasped at the opportunity I almost just missed.

"You... - keehee - could call the... delivery person... a... **Stew-ard**! KEEHEE!" I barely kept it together in light of my genius play on words.

"...Very well." And with that, the Lady Called the Mayor turned and walked back towards the crowd to start addressing them presumably about the neat things that I will be selling.

Did I tell her that?

Of course, it would have been fiscally irresponsible not to talk about my wares, after all. So I must have!

Probably.

I entered my home-shop to take in the damage of my shifting and resizing of the building. There was plenty of dead space to my left, which I was going to have to fill before something *e/se* moved in there. Whenever I have to change the size of the building, there's always a chance that some awkward right angles might appear, which I generally try to keep out of the inside of my home. They don't really hurt me, but they tend to make humans a little bit too comfortable. So it's more of a business practice to keep people moving in and moving out as fast as possible!

The products lining the serpentine shaped shelves that wound irregularly around the interior seemed undisturbed by my exterior alterations. My front desk had not yet reabsorbed the rocking chair back into one of its irregular lobes from which I had pulled it either. My inventory was filled with various slick items I had made, like a leather pouch that screamed marbles at a rate of quite a few per a little bit. Some of them were more useful than others, like the Curse Sword that shouts "DAY-UM!" whenever you swing it, which is delightfully distracting to both



enemies and allies alike. I also had several bottles that I had caught lightning in over the years: those were particularly popular with adventuring types AND town militias. I even had a few tempests in teapots that were great for making dramatic entrances into unsuspecting rooms!

By far the strangest thing people bought just all the time were these undying pink flowers that glowed brightly at night. They sprouted in my rooftop garden like weeds every full moon and were fairly irritating to harvest; even with my kama they took a few seconds each to remove. After a while, I just got sick of burning them and decided to put them on my shelves as a prank. And lo and behold, humans bought them out in minutes! I haven't the **slightest** clue what they are doing with them; eating them, perhaps? Regardless, these days I kept a ton in stock and they end up being the main money maker.

Everything seemed to be properly set up enough for me to open the front door... except for the dust. But by the Originating Four I **hate** dusting as much as I love lamb stew... Just... existing in the air and falling on everything that's **mine** like it has any right to do so. I've even *uninvited* dust to my home and it **still** gets in and all over my shelves.

So rude.

And then there's sweeping, which is really just ground dusting and is so many kinds of infuriating that I don't even own a broom, at least not since that Javelin Incident some 50 odd years ago. And can you believe that people will spill sudsie tea on the ground and call THAT cleaning as well?! Complete and utter nonsense, and yet humans get uppity about tidiness to a truly anomalous degree.

Alright. Hushpuppy's Traveling House of Strange and Wonderful and Terrible and Useful Goods is opening in Deurmort for the next year (ish) starting... Now!

#### Publican Jakeel Mooresin

A Witch Called Hushpuppy showed up a couple months ago.

It's an odd name for sure, but I've seen my fair share of weird patrons... and if their money is good and their spending is flagrant, who'm I to judge? She was some sort of legendary, immortal figure in the town's history that showed up a century ago and drew a baffling amount of people to the then small town with her wares. Many people came from far and wide, stuck around the town for a while, spending money on all sorts of local goods, and otherwise having a grand ol' time the likes of which the town had never seen before. Many people who had come to purchase from the Witch even stayed, built homes, lives, and families. Tales tell that the Witch herself quite enjoyed a good party and whenever she did leave her house, it was always a wild time.

Which brings us to today.

Even in just two short months, there were already many unfamiliar faces packed into my tavern, eating, drinking, and spending just the way I like them to: irresponsibly. The regulars, on the

other hand, were doing their best to squeeze every bit of coin they could out of said unfamiliar faces. Over by the corner fireplace, that unruly, boozed up chick Rinko was fleecing free drinks from outsiders and tourists who didn't know any better by telling mostly tall tales about the Witch. She had gotten stuck with the job of delivering stew to the Witch every morning and was milking that position for all it was worth. As long as people were spending, I didn't much care that she was getting wasted and running her little side hustle in my establishment. Another grifter by the name of Galefor was selling shitty little wood carvings with goofy faces as "Witch Offerings" that would 'Distract the Witch if you angered her', allegedly because she likes 'ugly-cute' things. This one was a clever grift, because it really sounded like it probably could be true. I wonder how long he had been workshoping **that** particular con.

That strange moment occurred that happens from time to time in a loud room: that few awkward moments where everyone seems to get quiet at the same time. Just then, the front door to the tavern opened, and there stood the Witch herself. Her black and blue eyes gleamed and her shark-like smile was as bright as it was unsettling. Looking past her, rather than seeing the familiar cobblestone streets, I saw another room that I knew could not possibly be there. I assumed it must be the Witch's home as she stepped into my bar from the room I knew could not be literally connected to my bar. An even deeper hush came over the tavern as everyone turned to take in the Witch, unsure of what to do as she strolled casually up to the bar, parting the crowd efficiently with each barefoot step she took. I had heard a lot about her, but this was my first time seeing her in person. She had on a long, flowing, bright blue skirt that seemed to billow in a wind that acted only on it and a simple grey-blue tunic that complimented the small bits of haphazardly cut dark blue hair that peeked out from under her large, floppy hat.

The Witch placed her charred-looking fingertips on the bar and stared me right in the eyes with unsettling intensity. I cleared my throat slightly, "Good to finally have ya here, A Witch Called Hushpuppy. I'm Jakeel, What can I get for you?"

"...Hmm... I wanna see if you've something I've not yet had... Bring out one of every red please."

"Very well. Ya heard her, mates." My staff went scrambling to gather the requisite items, "It will cost ya, of course." I could feel the tension from my patrons as I made my comment.

"Oh but of course! Business is business! Let's start with... This!" She brought down a sizable purse clearly full of coins. I reached in and my breath caught in my throat as I withdrew a large Capital Silver. This was a quite frankly irresponsible amount of money for anyone to be carrying, let alone throwing down all at once at a bar.

***Excellent.***

"AND!" She snapped her fingers with one hand, which apparently slammed the front door of my bar that led to her house, while producing a smaller bag of coins with the other, "Another couple rounds for *EVERYONE!*" She finished with a shout that reverberated unnaturally through the building. The disquiet that had ratcheted up to an apex when the door slammed diffused all at

once as she announced free drinks for the whole room and there was a collective roar of approval with scattered cheers for the Witch. I always thought it was strange that everyone - including Hushpuppy - tossed the term 'Witch' around the way they did. I decided since everyone had gone back to their business I'd just go ahead and ask.

"A Witch Called Hushpuppy."

"Hmm?" She looked up from the various glasses that were being lined up in front of her and filled with wine by the servers who the other patrons had thankfully decided to leave alone for the time being.

"I recall hearing from my papa a long time ago that 'Witch' was a slur for your kind of Magician. Always told me that 'If she ever returns, you shouldn't call her a Witch'. So... where do you stand on that?"

"Aaaahh a historian are we? How sweet of you! Here, match the sweet of your tongue to your words!" She extended her hand towards me with the palm facing up, quickly closed her hand one unsettlingly long finger at a time and then opened them all at once revealing a single hard candy. She smiled at me and I - figuring I had no choice in the matter - gingerly picked the candy out of her hand.

"I'll hold onto this, doesn't quite go with the beer I'm drinking." I made a show of sticking it in my pocket. There was no way I was eating this.

"Oooh yes that makes sense. Anyhow... Witches... Yeah not really sure where y'all got the idea that it was a slur. It's just a title, right? You need a word to describe stuff. Words are important. At some point everyone agreed that a Witch was someone who ate a Fae." She sipped the first glass of wine, made a face, then drank the rest of the glass, "Water, if you would."

"Of course," I poured her palate cleanser and slid it across the bar to her, "So then what-"

"A WITCH CALLED HUSHPUPPY WHAT IS UP GIIIIIIIIIIRRRRRRRRLLLL!~" Oh grind my dick with sand it's fucking **Rinko**.

"Rinko please-"

"Ah! It's the... **Stew**-ard!" The Witch beamed at the sloppy drunk with a toothy smile that would have been charming coming from anyone else. I guess the Witch was fairly taken with Rinko for stew-related reasons. I really ought to cut this chick off soon... I can't imagine the issues that might arise if she somehow slept through her task tomorrow morning.

"AHAHAHAHA. Yes that same funny joke that is totally still funny! I. Love. It." RINKO! PLEASE!

"Isn't it!??!" Oh. She's oblivious. Good, I guess?

"Yeeaaaaaaahhhh. So you're buying drinks for me riiiiighhttt?!"

“Are you bringing me stew tomorrow?”

“Uuhhh yeah that’s like my job ‘n’ shit now.”

“Then yes. Drinks for you tonight!” The Witch turned and tossed me a wink. I sighed and grabbed Rinko the lightest ale I had on tap. Fine lines we were all walking here, but from what I’ve heard compliance is the best move when it comes to the Witch. She doesn’t appear to be the type to aggressively rip people off... or even particularly malicious in general which was contrary to every story I’ve ever heard concerning Witches at large.

Over the course of the night a Witch Called Hushpuppy sampled every single bottle we had, before settling on one she apparently had never had before. She then proceeded to buy and drink all five bottles I had, while forcing another patron who had mustered up the courage to sit next to her to take notes for her on how she rated each wine. She claimed that over the next year she was going to drink her way down the list, and that I should prepare my inventory accordingly. Always nice to have a little bit of insider knowledge in this business. Near the end of the night there were several extremely drunk folks attempting to get the Witch to come with them to their homes or the inns they were staying at. To their credit, while she seemed utterly disinterested in the lot of them, she seemed to be pleased with the attention nonetheless. After they took their swings and missed, the last of the folk filtered out, and only the Witch and my staff remained.

“People are so cute. They do make the journey oh so pleasant. They need so much sleep too. A shame, imagine what they could accomplish if they let their minds wander forever... Dreams are fun too but...” She was rambling to no one in particular as she swirled the last sediment-filled dregs in her final glass. She threw her head back and downed it before standing suddenly. She wobbled in place for just a moment before steadying herself at the counter.

“Woah. Jakeel, that was... good. You’re a good boy, you know that?” She leaned across the bar and patted my head a couple of times before she walked towards the door and knocked on it twice. She looked over her shoulder and blew me a kiss... which resulted in an unsettling wet spot on my cheek.

“Don’t forget the candy, Publican.”

As she stepped through the threshold and the door closed behind her, I breathed a sigh of relief at a risky, but lucrative night of business. I tried to ignore the slowly accelerating writhing of the hard candy that sat in my pocket.

### Hushpuppy

Oof. I meant to exit the bar directly into my hammock room, but I messed up and walked into someone else’s house.

Whoops.

I wouldn't call myself *drunk* per say, but I was definitely a little bit impaired. Still walking and seeing straight, but a little bit *off*. So I was making my way carefully down the city streets, waving at various folks who started whispering amongst themselves, presumably about the wonderful wares they had seen at my shop. I'm sure they were excited for me to return to my plot of **land** that my home called home and get the shop opened back up. I even saw a few humans with those useless glowing pink flowers that they loved so much for some reason. The night just isn't **that** dark.

I don't really get it.

I finally reached the town square where my plot of **land** was and found the area quite devoid of life. As I approached my house, something seemed very out of place. Was it the open door? The mournful howl of despair coming from it? Or the warm glow from the window?

Definitely that last one. Yikes. I totally left a few scented candles lit in there. It would be bad for business if I accidentally set fire to the block! I resolved to be more careful in the future and turned my attention to the attempted intrusion and its inevitable result.

"PLEASE! SOMEBODY! ANYBODY! HELP ME! I'M SORRY!!!! I SHOULDN'T HAVE OPENED THE DOOR!" The regretful wailing of the foolish soul that had tried to enter my house without my permission barely passed the threshold which he had crossed.

"Ah! Now why'd you go and do that, sir? You weren't by any chance going to blow out my candles were you?" I poked my head through the doorway, which was at the very top of a large, closed cylindrical hole somewhere deep underground that I simply called the Sepulcher. I used this place as the default setting for my front door whenever I left the house and made sure to leave the door unlocked. If you lock a door, someone might break the door down, which is a really rude thing to do and makes a mess. So the best way to deal with would-be thieves is to make it easy for them to get inside and then trap them forever.

"What? No! I want nothing to do with your candles... *Please*... I'm sorry... I just wanted... It's so dark in here, I'm so scared..." The Thief in the Sepulcher whined pathetically.

"Ah. That's a shame. And here I thought he might be a nice guy." I shook my head in disappointment, "Hmm. So you wish to be let out. You must not be from around here. I don't think anyone from Deurmont would ever try to enter my home. So I don't really owe you anything on the basis of ancestry... What is it you are going to give me in exchange for your life?"

"I... I have nothing! That's why I tried to break into your home, so I could make money and make something of myself! The only other thing I have is my life!"

"Huh. That's no good... I kind of already have your life and double dipping is against the rules I'm afraid. However, I am feeling pretty good because I was drinking all night, so you can have one of these to hold on to while you wait!" I reached in my bag, pulled out one of those useless

glowing flowers, and tossed it through the doorway. Since humans liked the things so much, maybe it would bring him some solace. It fell all the way down and landed next to the Thief in the Sepulcher, who started screaming because I guess he didn't notice the pile of mummified remains of past holders of the Thief in the Sepulcher title.

"Bye-bye, Thief in the Sepulcher!"

"WAIT NO PLE-" I shut the door, tapped on it once, and then entered my home properly to begin setting up for another day of work after blowing out the candles I had so sloppily left lit throughout the night.

### Stew-ard Rinko Ginsieg

It's just not a good joke, you know?

And it's not just because I'm super fuckin' hung over.

Like, I get that this is a Witch we're talking about. She literally snacks on Fae... that's suuuuper not-to-be-fucked-with territory, you know? So I understand we have to be a bit... flexible when it comes to her demands. I heard she once did a great service for the region some time ago and that's why as a town we are as well off as we are... but still, to **have** to laugh every time she calls me a "**STEW**-ard" with a super awkward wink like she only barely remembers how to do so... Every. Single. Day... is a real torch between the tits.

I'll spare the details on how I ended up with this daily task, but it involved being low on money, too large a tab at Jake's tavern, and a few other short straws in a row. So my daily routine has been the following: wake up when the flames still sleep, rinse off, get dressed, do my hair, then I go to the mess hall, pick up a pot of simple-fuckin'-lamb-stew. Then I walk it over to her creepy, black, incredibly conspicuous house on mainstreet. I knock on her door, and then she *eventually* answers some time between right away and two hours later... Which sucks, but it is my current, solemn duty, as it were. As a result, I probably see the Witch more than anyone else in town, so people are always asking me about her... And since I'm smart, I never do shit for free. So I get free drinks in exchange for Witch stories.

The job had some unexpected perks.

So I was fairly shocked when I arrived one morning and saw someone I didn't recognize waiting outside of the Witch's store front. From his classy grey button-up shirt and dark brown suspenders to the stool he clearly brought for himself to sit in he was wrapped in a haughty air that immediately made me want to fuck with him. I worked my way over to the door and the man who had been sitting with his eyes closed and arms crossed peeked one eye open to steal a glance at me through some dangling blonde curls. Wow, even his hair and eyes pissed me off, how the hell do you look down on someone from a seated position anyhow? He brought his pointer finger up to his lips as if to say "I'm not here." Which seemed like a terrible idea... ambushing a Witch. So to do my good deed of saving a dude's life and carry out my solemn

duty for the day, I balanced the vat of stew on one leg and gave three loud knocks on the Witch's door.

"Hey A Witch Called Hushpuppy, it's the... **Stew**-ard with your delivery. Also there is some fuckin' dude sitting out here and waiting for you to come outside." Both of the man's eyes snapped open and he glared at me indignantly.

"Why?!"

"Eh piss off dude who the fuck even are you?"

"I will have you know that I am Edison Fairchild, Tax and Commerce Division Officer from the Capital of Torata! I have **business** with this *Witch* and you have robbed me of the element of surprise! How will you make this up to me?!" This blaze-boned asshole even has an annoying *name*, was he grown in some kind of magic cauldron with the goal of making the most irritating human being ever?

"Sounds like a **you** problem, dude. I ain't making up shit cause it ain't my business."

"How... dare y-" Suddenly the door opened in under a minute, which was a new record. Perhaps a stranger being outside piqued her interest. She peeked her head around the door and looked back and forth between the two of us. The idiot standing next to me stumbled backwards with a yelp at the sight of her - to be honest, fairly unsettling - face. No poker face on this one for sure and they sent **him** to negotiate with a Witch?

What a joke. Give me your job and your money, dude.

The Witch gave the fallen man something approaching a sour look, then turned to me with eyes narrowed as if in deep thought, "**Stew**-ard... Rin...ko?"

"Yes, A Witch Called Hushpuppy. Just like yesterday. And the day before that. And strangely enough, the day before that." We go through this every damn day, complete with her really, truly loud and awkward emphasis on the word 'Stew'.

"Hmm? Yes that sounds right. And presumably you will be here tomorrow. And the day after that. And strangely enough, the day after that as well."

"Presumably."

She gave a sharp, viciously effeminate laugh that echoed strangely for no discernible reason, "I'm so glad they sent you Rinko. I can't help but think that the others might turn out like this warbling bird on the ground right here. Should I know him?" Wait a minute. Am I friends with the Witch?

"I don't think so. Some Tax man from the Capital."



“Oh man they must **hate** me.”

“Maybe? Said he wanted to surprise you.”

“What? Why? Doesn’t he look like the surprised one?!”

“Right though?”

Once again her grating laughter filled the early morning air, “Well then, would you like to stay for breakfast, Rinko-child?”

“Sorry I’ve got shit to do, thanks though.” No way I was walking into that house. I kept on a brave face, but this store that had just popped up out of nowhere gave me the creeps. I always got the weird sensation that if I stepped through that doorway, I might end up... somewhere **else**.

“That so? More for me then!” She finally fully opened the door and reached for the vat I had set down on the cobblestone. Her creepily long blackened fingers wrapped around the handle and - despite her slim frame - she easily picked the whole vat up with one hand without any apparent Reinforcement of her limb. She really **is** some kind of monster when you get right down to it. But I still get to run my side hustle, so she could be a Fae or a Sprite or a Fekthal for all I cared. I turned around, spat at the feet of the Taxman on the ground, who was still stammering uselessly on the ground, and walked away to go kill some time until Jake’s tavern opened back up.

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Man it’s been over a month and the blonde prissy shit is **STILL** bothering the Witch every day. I’ve taken to hanging out on a nearby bench and watching their interactions to add some more ‘outsider spice’ to my Witch stories at the tavern. I don’t know what it is that he’s demanding of her, but it usually ends with the door flying open, her cackle spilling out into the town square, and all of a sudden he finds himself on the ground, in a nearby field, or as with just now: on the bench next to me.

“**That faerie-fucking whore.**” WOW. The gargantuan balls on this fuckin’ guy. Does he think she can’t hear him from halfway across the square? Or does he think she won’t eat him? ‘Cause I wouldn’t count on either of those being true.

“Dude what even are you doing here?”

“That is *none* of your concern.”

“Yeah well the Witch definitely thinks it’s none of her’s either so I guess you S-O-L on the being listened to front.”

“...”

“Well? Mister *Edison Fairchild*?” I did my best impression of a snooty noble’s voice while bringing my index finger and thumb up to my right eye in a mock monocle.

### Hushpuppy

This guy doesn’t give up! I suppose persistence is an admirable trait when you’ve a finite life, but still!

He’s been showing up and banging on my door every day for... maybe a few weeks? Something like that. He has been making ridiculous demands whenever I DO open the door, like ‘You **will** move your shop to the Capital and produce magical items for Queen and country!’ and ‘You **will** show your books and pay your taxes for the good of Rheinland’ and ‘You **will** assist the Rheinland-Fae border effort with your Witch powers!’ To all of which I responded in kind ‘Nope,’ ‘Can’t audit me if I don’t keep books,’ and ‘What do you mean *Witch powers*?’ But more importantly... who is going to **make** me do any of that? Apparently the holder of his leash was convinced that they could just **tell me what to do and I’d do it**.

Whhhaaaat?

What kind of fantasy were they living in anyhow?

There was a loud knock on my door and I sighed, “Who knocks?”

“A Witch Called Hushpuppy, may I please enter?” Oh! It was the Lady Called the Mayor! I gestured at the door to open and it complied.

“Hey Mayor thanks for the plot of **land**! It has been working out super well!”

“Uh, yes you’re welcome? I’m here to discuss the, um... Capital issue you’ve been having?”

“*I’m having a capital issue?! Wow leave it to the Mayor to be able to judge all the transactions I’ve made since I got here! I didn’t even know I was having one of those!*” I wonder if her PsyEn Ability can track transactions made! No wonder she’s the Mayor!

“What? No. Wait. I’m talking about the commerce officer from the Capital of the country, not capital as a fiscal concept.”

“...Oh. Yeah. Wow that makes a lot more sense,” Oof, that’s sort of embarrassing isn’t it? “What about him? He has youth, aggression, and audacity in spades. None of which are particularly appealing to me.”

“Yes... I sort of figured that. The thing is, he’s something of an important person from the capital, and... I was wondering if you’d do me the favour of not eating him. It would be a bit problematic for me down the line if he were hurt.”

"I mean... I've yet to eat a human, I'm really on more of a regular tasty food and the occasional Fae diet... But otherwise I'm not sure I follow? Is he with the Capital or one of yours? Or were you saving him for yourself?"

"No he isn't one of mine, but-"

"So if he doesn't belong to you why do you care who eats him?"

"No one is eating him!" Why. Do. You. Care. Then. Humans can be so impossible sometimes!

"Huh. Okay. Keep your secrets then. Regardless, I'm guessing you know more about this logistical stuff than I do. As long as he doesn't show up with a bunch of warriors trying to strong-arm me into moving, I don't think either of us will have anything to fuss about!"

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Wow. He showed up with a bunch of warriors to try to strong-arm me into moving.

Am I a prophet?

Can I see the future?!

Will I ever have unlimited stew?

...

Questions for later.

I was sitting on the ceiling when it happened. There was a stain up there the origin of which I was attempting to puzzle through when there was a particularly loud knock on my door.

"Hushpuppy! In the name of Edison Fairchild you **will** open this door!" Whaaaaaat? Him again?

"If you don't open up we will break down this door. I have a dozen soldiers here and-" Wooooow. He's serious isn't he?

**Fine.**

I let the door open and a small infestation of armed and lightly armored humans flowed into my abode like so much rancid water. They were looking around, oblivious to my positioning directly above them. I guess nobody trained them to look up? Or maybe their silly headgear blocked their vertical vision?

Yikes.

"I HAVE WASTED ENOUGH TIME TRYING TO BE POLITE WITH YOU!" Wait, the last few weeks was him being **polite**? Poor thing... he must be broken. Although I had to admit it was amusing, that he was still shouting his orders from outside my home. Then again, that strangely made him the wisest one here. This group didn't look like the most terribly disciplined type. From where I was

sitting there were four or maybe five sword dancers, a trio of shield bearers, and four of unknown specialty. But not a single one of them looked like an actual Witch Hunter.

So as ever I had nothing to fuss about.

Until one of them got bored and started poking at one of the goods on my shelf.

Noooooope.

I decided that I wasn't going to play with them. Here or at all.

"Hey boys and girls. Hands off the goods please! They take entire... days? Maybe? To make!" They all hopped in shock, whipping their heads to and fro.

"Up here!"

"Get down from there, Witch!"

"Please. A Witch Called Hushpuppy. If we are going to go by titles, kindly use the whole thing." Now I just need to get them to follow me through a doorway... I might have to be sneaky about it though. I mean, they would know better than to just follow me through my house, right? I crawled on all fours along the ceiling and I heard them draw their weapons.

"Calm yourselves, children. I can't come with you without grabbing a few things, right?" I let myself drop behind my lobular front desk. I made a show of rummaging around underneath it, but in reality I already had what I needed on me: A small piece of metal stained with rust and many things that weren't rust. Sometimes it is quite important to not know the origin of a stain.

Or so they say.

"Well-well, looks like there aren't enough taxes or whatever it is you're here for up front. I keep them all in the back?" Hah! My acting was impeccable. I tapped a rectangle on the wall behind my front desk and opened the door, stepping through into the darkness beyond. And then-

Wow. They actually followed me in here.

1, 2, 4...8, 12?!

They all rushed in here?

Seriously?

This was a bit too simple wasn't it?

I thought one of them would at least cover the door from the outside or something, right?

This was one of *those* places that I had stumbled upon. Sometimes, I would open doors with no particular direction in mind and they would lead me to places that didn't seem to actually be

anywhere. Or more specifically, they were nowhere specific. The door I had opened closed behind them and it was actually quite dark without the light spilling through the threshold. In the impenetrable darkness, I opened a door in the ground and dropped through it, landing several floors above. I guess I should teach them something before I leave them here. I **am** a great teacher, after all.

“All Magic is the same - more or less - but Threshold Magic is by far the simplest to use. After all, assuming that you know what is on the other side of a closed door is naught but arrogance. You warriors moonlighting as Witch Hunters, why did you think that picking a fight with a Witch in her domain was a good idea?” I was honestly curious. It was always such a waste of otherwise reasonably long lives to barge into another person’s home - usually while I’m eating - and demand that I die! But they did not answer my question at all; my students just weren’t engaged in my class! I could hear them shuffling about, confirming each other’s presence, but otherwise ignoring my question.

Stupid Moonlighters.

“I suppose I should welcome you foolish humans to the Slaughterhouse. This place isn’t mine and honestly, I don’t even know where it is. I think a few other Witches are using it like I do: as a sort of dumping ground for those who don’t wish to make a mess of their domain... I don’t see them often, but the other Witches are **much** older than I and **much** scarier. A couple of them can’t even hold their Substance together consistently anymore; too much Soul to contain in a singular form anymore. Personally I think they should have just let themselves change, so they wouldn’t collapse like that.” Such vanity.

But even I knew better than to speak **that** thought aloud.

“Don’t you hide from us, Witch!”

“Light a torch!”

“Where’s the door?!”

Ugh. They are not listening. I saw a small fire leap into existence in the dark. Since we were in the presence of the Ashes of A Witch Called Kazbek, I figured I would be cheeky and steal the flame; I could make better use of it anyway. There was a small yelp as I reached across the room and down a few floors, plucked the fire from the torch, and held the flame in the palm of my hand. It wasn’t quite Pyromancy, but it still felt sort of neat to do. A Witch Called Kazbek was once terribly powerful and quite obsessed with Fire. They decided that they would steal not just **a** fire, but the **idea** of Fire and Tyrseil - Lord of Flame - burnt them to unkindlable ash for the infraction. I shook my head at the thought and fractally distributed the flame throughout the Slaughterhouse.

They looked up and saw me far up above them through the metallic grates that made up the floor of each level, “There she is! Get her!”

“Seriously, what do you humans even get out of this?!” Why does nobody ever realize how outmatched they are?! I mean... they **can't** get out of here, but they should at least have tried to run or hide or **something**. With the light I kindly distributed to guide them, they started sprinting up the gargantuan, steel-grated spiral staircase up to the 4th layer where I stood.

“How did he possibly convince the lot of you that this was a good idea?! **Who goes on a Witch Hunt without a Witch Hunter?!**” Waste of a... huh. What day is it? I should go eat some stew... Seriously, people always barge in while I'm eating... I think I was eating? I was probably about to eat! They were about to reach the opening in the grating next to where I stood when I clapped my hands, closing the opened hole with the surrounding steel like a porous door. They reached the floor - ceiling for them, I guess - and began shouting threats they had no way of making good on. They probably wouldn't realize how hopeless this situation was for them for a little while, but I had better things to do than indulge in that realization. As I contemplated what to do next, I felt the distant sensation of someone pounding on the front door to my house.

The Rude Guy!

I almost forgot about him!

...

I completely forgot about him. This was pretty much his fault, so he should probably be in here too.

#### Edison Fairchild

Absolutely unbelievable.

My job is on the line here!

How can this Witch not see that compliance is the best result for everyone involved! My Queen sent me out here, convinced that great prosperity would come to the country as a whole if we could capture and keep the Witch contained. Rumor has it that the Witch known as Hushpuppy is fairly young, and does not wield powers so great and terrible as the ancient Witches that antagonize so many modern horror stories. Not only that, but rumors across this country and others say that she also doesn't eat humans. So along with her strange desire to build up random villages keeping her from doing anything drastic, we should have an advantage in dealing with her.

So why was she being so difficult about this? There should be no functional difference between running her store here or in the Capital. So why won't she just cease her wandering ways and comply?!

And what could possibly be taking them so long? I hadn't heard anything from beyond the door in minutes. I slammed my fist on the door several times again, making my displeasure known. I looked over my shoulder and saw that one bar wench that insisted on watching me every day

that I came here sitting on the usual bench and making the usual obscene gestures at me whilst eating some type of roasted kebab. Her eyes slowly widened as I looked at her and I turned back to the door to find it wide open and very dimly lit beyond the threshold. Within was a strangely shaped room that smelled of damp and metal. Suddenly - without ceremony - the Witch's face protruded through the doorway, her face was centimeters from mine. I could hear shouts and hollers from beyond her; voices I well recognized as I felt my spine freeze.

"Fair is Fair." The Witch whispered to me, one of her bright blue pupils collapsing into a feline slit as I fell into the role of prey.

"...N-now I am certain w-we can work something out. A-a-after all! I'm here on a mission o-o-of diplomacy! Ssso it would be a bad idea to-" She suddenly brought a long, blackened finger up to my lips.

"Stop talking, human. You are very rude. And you are never safe. Goodbye." Her hand suddenly encompassed my face and I was yanked into the darkness before I ever had a chance to scream.

### Stew-ard Rinko Ginsieg

...

...

...Well that ain't good.

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### Hushpuppy

I held back a regular old steel straight sword with my kama, confused.

Several months passed without any particular excitement or otherwise rude characters. I think so anyhow... It was definitely less than a year. I can still keep track of years for the most part. The Lady Called the Mayor was fairly nettled at the disappearance of the tax man and his goons and I don't think she believed me when I told her I didn't know where they were. Which was wild, because I really have no idea where the Slaughterhouse is located!

But she never asked me what happened to them though.

Specificity of language **is** important, after all.

There had been a steady stream of outsiders coming to town, dropping in at my store, trying to negotiate non-negotiable prices, and emptying their purses of all they were worth. Humans really, really like magic items; especially those dumb glowing flowers. Even some of the townsfolk had bought flowers in bulk to hang up all around the town and in the surrounding



area. I do feel like that is a bit of an overreaction to the darkness, especially when it comes every night.

So silly.

But anyhow...

Things had been fairly uneventful around here, so I was really surprised when this lady came in and immediately tried to attack me in my own home. As usual, I was eating at the time. Not that I'm always eating, but that people always interrupt me when I'm eating. There was a knock on the door and I allowed it to open. Some woman dressed in lightweight, full body armor (including a helmet, of all things!) came through the door and pulled the door closed behind her; a rather audacious thing to do when you're a new customer.

"Welcome to A Witch Called Hushpuppy's Traveling House of- Oh." I was disappointed when she leapt at me in a blur, clearly using most, if not all of her PsyEn to Reinforce her strength and agility. She clearly wasn't here to spend money... and I'm a merchant, not a mugger. There were a lot of ways I could have dealt with the attack, but I was trying really really hard not to kill anyone **inside** of Deurmont. So I blocked the attack with my kama - maybe the only thing I still owned from my early days - and tried to talk to my would-be assailant.

"Uh... can I help you?"

"You can die, you murderous Witch." Hmm, murder? I thought back to the last few years, but couldn't really... Oh! I guess those humans from a few months back were probably either dead of thirst or had been eaten by one of the other Witches who used the Slaughterhouse. So I guess that made me a murderer.

"I don't really see how I benefit from that. And since this is a place of business, we should both benefit, right?"

"A Witch Hunter does not sip tea with a Witch and I will have your head for killing my friends."

"I have a lot of problems with everything you just said, so why don't we slow down for a bit." I threw her - carefully - back across my store, and she landed by the door. She seemed startled by my physical strength for some reason.

"Look, I've been cooped up all day, and I'm trying really hard not to make any more corpses inside the city limits. But I especially really don't want to do this here, it's actually pretty tidy here for a change. Now since I'm requesting a change of location, it's only fair that you pick the place." I even dusted recently...ish.

The Lady in the Armor seemed to contemplate this long and hard.

"Fine, Witch. It doesn't much matter to me where you die. Only that it's at **my** hands. But if you try anything, no amount of witnesses in this town will save you." Oooh that was a good line. But

maybe we can talk our way out of this yet. She turned to leave and I nudged open the door before she ended up the Sepulcher. She's **definitely** no Witch Hunter, that's for sure.

We exited into the townsquare and she insisted that I walk in front of her, which was the smartest thing she had done so far. We passed through the myriad streets and passed through the front gate unmolested. On our way through the fields and towards the woods, we passed the Smiling Scarecrow of Deurmont, which I hadn't visited in some time. Underneath the thick canopy, I could hear her boots crunching behind me rhythmically as she barked her directions at me.

"So metal-face, you say it with such passion, what exactly is a 'Witch' to you, then?" I tried to make some conversation as we entered the clearing that appeared to be her destination.

"Simple: a very evil, cannibalistic Magician that must be purged for the safety of all humans."

"Honey... No. Talk about skinning your metal-face to spite your butt! Do you understand how much the presence of Witches here and there stays the odd small Fae encroachment? At least four young ones have decided to move away because I have been here for.... I don't know... probably a year? Also I haven't done any cannibalism! Of that I am certain."

"Reframe it all you want, monster. You all start with Fae, but eventually you all end up consuming the Souls of Humans! Just like you did with my friends! I won't let that happen! Know that it was Jasmin Stellana that killed you."

A long, tired groan escaped my mouth. A Moonlighter with a grudge... I really didn't want to kill her with my own hands, but she wasn't giving me much of a choice. I rested my face in the palms of my hands and waited.

### Jasmin Stellana

It was vastly underestimating me. The plan was always to draw it to this place. It went and made this far too easy. I very nearly had the thing's head with my first attack at the shop. It lucked out that it happened to have a weapon on hand, since it clearly hadn't had the time to use magic.

I activated my Ability - Leaf Dance - to raise all of the fallen leaves in the area and suspend them in space. The Witch still had not ceased covering its eyes with its hands. My Third Eye didn't show anything amiss, so I continued with the plan. The leaves converged into an opaque blanket and began shifting noisily around the Witch in a leafy cocoon. Blinded and deafened, there was no way it could possibly fend off my attacks.

Fully Reinforcing my body now, I pulled the heavy repeating crossbow off my back and unloading all of the loaded quarrels into the leafy mass. I dropped it to the ground once empty, and sprung around the canopy to confound any directional sound she might have picked up from the fallen crossbow, and dove in with a proper thrust at her center of mass. I felt a slight resistance as it plunged through both sides of the leaf blanket and gave a vicious twist.

That's what you get for underestimating my skill **and** my rage, Witch.

I withdrew my sword and hopped back away from the mass, canceling my Ability to gaze upon my handy work, still in a defensive posture. The leaves began to fall away in the absence of my PsyEn and a breeze rolled through the clearing to carry them away enmass, revealing-

A completely unharmed Witch.

"Yikes. I'm in two minds about you right now, cause on one hand, that trick with the leaves was really neat. But on the other hand, you left yourself completely uncoated during your attack. So I guess you're still an idiot." The Witch was looking at its own body, inspecting where I had surely struck it. I opened my Third Eye, and **did** see evidence of my attacks - a faded muted outline of the wounds that I should have inflicted - on the Witch's chest and abdomen.

"What trickery is this, Witch?!"

"Magic, duh." She mocked me with an unsettling cackle that seemed to echo unnaturally in the forest clearing where we stood, "But you should pay less attention to me and more attention to yourself. Understanding one's failings always starts with introspection, after all."

Despite myself, I glanced down and felt a chill run down my spine as I saw the same outline of wounds that I had put on the Witch on my own person. I slowly looked back up at the Witch and her face twisted into one of shock and pleasure as she brought the curled fingers of her left hand up near her mouth.

"Oh... My. That was a good face, Jasmin Stellana. I think that just made coming out here worth it. It was worth holding back the reversal of cause and effect in the middle of its backlash as well." The clenched fist down by its side had been glowing intensely, leaking Magical radiation. She started to relax her fist and I slammed my Coating back into place as fast as I could and-

"Too late for that."

I fell to my knees and felt my breath go out of me. Somehow the crossbow wounds I had applied to the Witch now adorned my flesh with very real pain and leaking very, real blood. Not somehow, of course, but by Magic. The outline of the twisted gut wound remained untriggered.

"H-how?!"

"Because you're green. A novice. An amateur. A **Moonlighter**," She ended her list with a vicious sneer, "A true Witch Hunter would know to NEVER completely drop their Coating against a Witch. It is your ONLY defense against Magic being used directly on your person, Moonlighter. A Witch Hunter would never waste energy on physical armor, because it would only slow them down... And they'd **never** show up to a Witch's house without even a fleck of Meteoric Iron to finish the damn job. This is why you're just a Moonlighter."

"W-w-w-wait. Please. I don't deserve this! You murdered my friends! I'm sorry, Witch- Magician! Hushpuppy! I'll do anything! I was out of line. It was rage! When I heard that a killer wit- a Magician had killed all those people... and was still being celebrated as a boon, I couldn't think! I'm sorry." I babbled my explanation as I allowed myself to fall forward in prostration. Breathing was difficult and my chest hurt, badly. I heard her footsteps approaching me and felt a sharp pain as she yanked my head up by the helmet. Her other hand was faintly glowing and slightly clenched.

"P-pl-"

"Oh, Jasmin Stellana... No! It doesn't matter what or how you call me, a Witch by any other name is still... oh how did you put it?" She brought my face close to hers, her terrifying black and blue eyes staring right into mine.

"A very evil Magician." She whispered as my stomach exploded outwards.

### Hushpuppy

I dropped the idiot Moonlighter to the dirt.

Even with that amazing look on her face earlier, there was still a foul taste in my mouth; at least the other Moonlighters had the good sense to come in a group. Safety in numbers and what not.

This was just suicide by Witch.

I'd been having a good time in Deurmont, but it might be time to move on soon, or it'll become less known for amazing stew and more for corpses and disappearances. Now then... What to do with this Moonlighter's corpse? It seemed like such a waste to leave it here... but I don't really feel any compulsion to eat humans. Maybe I should bring it to the Slaughterhouse as a gesture of good faith to the older Witches.

Oh, she is still alive and talking. Whoops, I was **not** listening.

"-Witch Hun...ter... please, she can't think that I... just walked out for no reason too... So... please... return my corpse home. I beg of you." Oh. She wants Last Rites. That's adorable.

"So... basically, you want me to bring your corpse back to your house? Are you sure about this?" Like... why though? This didn't seem like it could ever be worth it to her. Considering she was essentially dead.

"Am... I sure?"

"Yes. You are asking for a favour, one that takes me out of my way. Which means the favour must be returned. But you are dead, so you won't be able to return the favour. Which means I have to **take** something important from you. So I reiterate: are you sure about this?"

"I... am...will give... anything." Ugh her voice is super gurgly now. Sounds like a drowning coyote.

"Huh. Alright then." I picked up the Moonlighter's sword and plunged it into her chest. I yanked it out with a twist and she gave a final wet cry of pain. After a little bit, her eyes glazed over and I got to work. Taking a deep breath, I let my hands be doused in Magic and reached through her boots, well into her ankle.

"You said to bring your corpse home, Body That Was Once Called Jasmin Stellana. But I don't know where you live. Thankfully, everyone has a Homebound Tarsal in their right ankle, and it remembers where home is located. Ah! Here it is!" I pulled out an irregularly shaped bone from her ankle and turned it over in my hand. It was fairly well worn, so at least she returned home fairly frequently. I still don't understand what drove her to throw her life away if she still had demands to make of the living.

"Now all we need is a doorway. Did you know most rectangles can be doors if you try hard enough?" As I told the corpse this, I hopped around it, dragging my heel through the dirt around the body to draw a rectangle. I ground my sole into my rectangle to make a door handle, and stepped back to observe my handiwork: it wasn't perfect, but it would do.

I squatted down next to the door, and knocked on it three times with the Homebound Tarsal. I felt the air quiver, and nodded with satisfaction; that should do it. I reached out and 'grasped' the door handle I drew, turned it, and flicked the door open. The body fell right through the new opening in the ground, and I hopped down into it. My body reoriented as I fell through, and I landed deftly on my feet on the other side of the threshold. I looked back at the opening and saw only clear blue sky through the door. I closed it with a smile.

How pretty.

I took in my surroundings: it was far from a modest abode; well decorated - but not gaudily - with candlesticks of silver and paintings that appeared to be of consistent make. Perhaps someone here was an artist. The rug in the entryway was thick and soft and rapidly soaking up blood and ichor from the Moonlighter's stomach, so I gave the body a kick and it landed in what appeared to be a common room. Now then, time to look for something important to ta-

"Mommy?" What. She left a child home alone to come after me? Seriously?

A little girl trotted around the corner and stopped in her tracks, eyes wide. She was a tiny thing, probably just over 75 centimeters. She had smooth, shiny black hair that was tied in a braid and slung over her right shoulder, which was bare in her sleeveless, vermilion top that appeared to wrap around and button at one shoulder. She took a couple of barefoot, hesitant steps forward and her dark grey linen work pants flapped ever so slightly, being just a tad too big for her.

"Who... are you? Where is my mommy?" The child asked me slowly.

"I am a Witch Called Hushpuppy." Her eyes became even larger at the word 'Witch', "And your mother is over there." I pointed into the common area and she trotted down the hall excitedly, turned the corner, and froze once more.

"Oh right. I probably should have started with the fact that she is dead." Whoops. She's probably going to cry now. That's going to be distracting. I left her there to take in the sight and walked around the house, perusing it. There was plenty of art, weapons, and various nicknacks... but nothing that screamed 'important' in the way that I wanted. After one full pass through the house, I wondered if I might just drop the corpse off at the Slaughterhouse after all if I couldn't get anything neat out of this place. Walking to the living room, I almost tripped over the child whom I had all but forgotten about.

"Oh. You're still here..." This was pretty awkward, actually. I don't tend to interact with next-of-kin, let alone children, "So... what are you going to do with that? I'm not exactly sure why she asked me to bring that back here... I assume it's for you. Are you gonna eat it or something?" I asked the child, genuinely curious. Honestly if she could store it properly she could probably get a week or two of sustenance out of that body at her size. She whipped around, eyes tearing up but not quite shedding quite yet.

"...Did you kill my mom?"

"Oh not at all. Her own sword killed your mom, I *murdered* your mom." I corrected her, even at her age, language was very important. Her lips quivered and tears began to stream down her face, tiny fists clenched. She couldn't be more than 12 or 13.

"How many Winters have you seen, child?"

"...Six." Close enough.

"Then... well, you probably have enough food for a few months in here, right?"

"Why did you... kill my mom?"

"In my defense - literally - she started it. You're not going to begin some sort of multi-decade quest for revenge now, are you?" I guess it would make sense if she were angry, but maybe I should nip this in the bud now?

"..."

"Well. Let's see if you're smarter than your mother was." I pulled out a small curved knife and tossed it onto the floor in front of her, it stuck point first out of the floorboard. She looked upon it suspiciously and her eyes darted back and forth between it and I. Ever so slowly, she bent down and grasped the blade with both hands, yanking it out of the floor with some effort. She looked at me, back at the Moonlighter's corpse, and back at me. I did not have high hopes for her as she tentatively stepped towards me, but I was surprised to see that rather than attacking me,

she simply walked past me. She trotted down the hall with her back to me and disappeared around the corner.

In choosing not to attack me, the child had already demonstrated infinitely more wisdom than anyone else who approached me with a blade in hand in the last year or so. Curious as to what she was going to do, I squatted down in the hallway and started drawing little stick figures on the wall with my finger. I could hear rummaging, banging and the occasional choked back whimper. Eventually, I heard her tiny little footsteps tip-tapping closer and looked up to see a magnificent sight: she was holding the knife in her mouth and carefully carrying a large plate of what appeared to be sliced bread, chunks of cheese, and cured meats. I twisted on the balls of my feet to fully face her, still squatting such that we were roughly the same height. She came to a stop in front of me, stepping onto a portion of blood-soaked carpet from her mother's still bleeding body; the sensation of which caused her to stiffen, but she held onto her platter and slowly set it down between us.

Well look at this little survivor!

"Why do you feed me, child?"

She took the knife out of her mouth and handed it back to me, "...Mom always... said that \*sniff\* you should... offer a guest... a snack..." Tears ran down her face once more. I see; such intelligence. That makes **perfect** sense. I stacked some cheese and meat onto a slice of bread and took a bite. It was quite good for how simple it was; these people really were rather well off to have such high quality ingredients. Yet I was still having trouble finding anything of real val-

Hold on.

"Child. Can you cook food?" I'm a genius.

"Um...y-yeah?" Hmm. **Hmm**. Something of value indeed.

"Child, how are you called?"

"I-I'm... Kalyani Stellana." Stellana again, eh? I suppose that makes sense too. Her name didn't feel fake, which was a problem. Can't have her just giving that out.

"Well then child, from now on tell nobody your true name, there is too much power in the naming of names. Your name is now... Nova. I am A Witch Called Hushpuppy. Because I did a favour for your mother and she is not alive to return the favour, I must take something that she values. Fortunately for everyone involved, **you** appear to be the only thing of value in this house, so you are going to come with me." The girl stared at me, wide eyed, taking in my explanation and - after a little bit - silently mouthing her new name to herself.

"You will be a chore girl for a Witch Called Hushpuppy."

"...A chore girl?" She whispered hesitantly.



“Yes! You will cook, you will clean, and you will do whatever else I need you to do” This seemed like a fair trade, keeping ingredients around would be simple enough. If I could have her figure out how to make lamb stew, this would definitely be a net positive. And besides, how hard could keeping a child be?

“Now unless you have any leftover business with that corpse, Nova, shall we go?” She took one last look at her mother’s body and a discrete sequence of unrecognizable emotions flashed across her face. She shook her head as if to banish some intrusive thought, ran off into a little room off to the side, and came back with a small stuffed cat under her arm and a faded pink blanket in hand. I turned and knocked on the door to return to my house and felt a little tug down at my side. The little one was clinging to my skirt with her free hand. I guess crossing through a Magic threshold for the first time would probably be safer for her if she hung onto the caster. Good intuition.

I opened the door and we stepped across the threshold into my store, which was probably reasonably child proof.

More or less.