

# In Shadows Roam

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*Happily ever after is for the fairy tales. Jack has lost his Lily to another, and the only way he can get her back is with Darkness's aid. Even if it comes with a price.*

# 1. The Darkened Heart

"I love you, Jack. . . ."

"She said those words, those very words, with lips as soft as cloves in the sun and as fresh as blossomed roses, wet with dew. Such beauties, those liar's lips." Jack looked up, eyes as sharp and void as flint. He cut the witch with that hard gaze, staring through her from across her stump table. "How could she use such expressions, like love and forever, when she did not mean them?"

The hag tilted her head, her wrinkles twice-folded, eyes deep with regret as she watched the young man before her, the hero of the kingdom, the Forest Prince as the children called him.

"A curse to the creature who turned your soul so black, young Jack," the witch cooed in despair.

"Don't speak such words, woman," Jack snapped. He leaned forward as quickly as a wolf snatching up a hare. "Such a treacherous curse you weave. You should know that you hex royalty."

"I was not referring to the princess, hero." The hag stood from her dirt floor seat, limping toward her store of goods, the crook of her back level with the crown of her head.

"Blame the sinner, not the sin," Jack replied, picking leaves off the blue tunic that he wore.

The witch woman turned quickly, shuffling back toward Jack. Even with the man sitting, she was almost at the level of his eye, and Jack could smell the rot of her teeth and the scum of her tongue.

"Who taught you that word? Sin. . . Innocence should not know it," the hag said. "Did Princess Lily know it before she touched the unicorn? No. It was a wise tale, a whisper amongst the beggar roads that she heard on late nights. Her father sheltered her, as the whole kingdom knew well. She was a child, and she came back from that enchanted land a woman."

Jack lowered his eyes.

It had been a beautiful homecoming for the Princess and the Hero who had rescued her, the forest child. They had both been welcomed back with open arms, but during their journey, Lily had kept to herself, giving Jack a sad smile but no answer to his questions, to his chagrin comments. Jack realized what had kept her mind so busy when they reached her father's castle. While Jack was welcomed like a son and given quarters worthy of one of the royal family members, he was not a prince, a fact that kept his love for Lily at a stand still.

Lily said that she had meant to tell him, that she had come to the forest that day to give him her goodbye--to tell dear Jack that her hand had been given to another. But it was her father who announced that the date of her marriage had been changed to embrace the warm weather. Silly Jack. Poor silly boy, the news had spread across the kingdom two seasons ago--she was to

wed Prince Robin of the land of Rothmus.

When Jack had heard this, his heart had all but stopped, taken by a seed of black rage whose vines coiled his innards like a squeezing snake around a hog. And so he had left the castle, no word to any, to seek the witch who dwelled outside her stone walls. A woman of such power would surely know a spell that could change the eyes of the King and his Princess.

"I can not make you into a prince," the hag said at last. "Such a glammer could harm the balance, boy. It would hurt your princess--it would surely hurt you."

"Then what good are you!" Jack spat, standing straight, like the men he had seen in the King's Hall, and towering over the old woman. "How can a witch refuse to cast a spell? Who can I go to for help if not you?"

The hag looked up, her sunken lips curved up. "This is a gray world we live in, Jack. Once upon a time, it was black and white--decisions so very easy to make. There was a hero and there was a villain. Innocence was their play things. I believe your life in the forest did not teach you of gray. Well, then, boy, you have much to learn."

"I don't understand," Jack said in a gentler voice. His shoulders hunched in surrender. Anything the woman could give, he would take.

"Love is a gray matter, Jack, for it dances so often with hate," the witch continued. "Sometimes, those in love must do things that, in a world of black and white, may be called wrong." She paused, stepping over to her store again. The witch grabbed a small something from one shelf, holding it out to Jack. "I can not aid you, and I doubt that even light can in this situation. The side of right is condemning you, Jack. Now, if you're a good boy, things might turn out on top, but if you want a quicker solution to your problems. . . ."

Jack took the tiny object from her. It was a seed the size of his thumb, rotted with worm holes and gleaming with dark slime that stuck to his fingers. He cocked his head in confusion. "What is this?"

"A solution." The witch stepped back from him. "Your heart must be strong as your will for you to travel this path. Harm will most likely come to you, but it may be worth it for a man in such need. That is a seed from the Tree of Darkness. Go to that place. . . . If you wish for aid, then the world of dark is always most willing to be of service."

Jack's eyes widened and he shook his head, his hair flying loose. "No! I could not do that! I can not go to evil. What would Lily say. . . ."

The witch shrugged. "How would I know, Jack O'squo; The Green? It is not Lily who stands before me. It is not Lily who has went so very far for love. It is you." She squinted until her eyes almost disappeared in flesh. "The question is, my boy, how far are you willing to go for love?"

Jack blinked, his fist clenching the seed. In a whisper he answered, and the forest writhed, "To Hell and back."