

Bound By Blood and Spirits

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Everyone who came to see Anjem on the eve of her wedding day told her how fortunate she was. "You will be the fourth of seven women to be wed. You should count yourself blessed, even if your husband belongs to another," the women whispered among themselves. Unfortunately, it had to be him.

No one called Anjem's groom by his name, at least not around her. He was always "him," a faceless specter summoned by mere mention. Anjem knew the stories about Rosek, just like everyone else. When he was a boy, a banshee had saved him from death, and in return, his mother had promised him to the spirit woman.

Rosek could never love another.

Anjem pretended to be unbothered by the swirling stories and the veiled looks of pity from her mother. The wedding ceremony took all night to finish. There were gifts to unwrap, prayers to burn, and offerings to make to all the household deities. Anjem wandered amidst the chaos, half-listening to the gossip about Rosek's first wife, the beautiful blacksmith's daughter who had been driven mad by the banshee. It was common knowledge that Rosek had loved her, and this love had enraged the banshee enough to drive poor Nandin to her death.

When the houngan arrived, an old witch, wreathed like a wilting cabbage in layers of robes, she clucked her tongue at Anjem in disapproval. "This one," the houngan said, facing Anjem's mother seriously, "she has great promise. Her future, though..."

The houngan paused, her eyes expectant in the hooded mask of her face until Anjem's mother set a calabash of cloudy palm wine before her. The old woman took a long swig and smacked her lips.

"Her future, though," continued the houngan, "it is uncertain. Her groom, he is a cursed one, is he not?"

No one said a word, but Anjem could feel the silence directed at her.

"Yes," Anjem finally replied, her words heavy as stones on her tongue.

"If she can break the curse, all is settled. And if not," the old woman took another swig from the calabash, followed by a healthy belch, "then she will die like the other one."

Unlike her adventurous sisters, Anjem had accepted her fate long ago. The women in her family did not have happy marriages. Beautiful as they all were, men in a village as small as theirs kept away from outcast women. The women in Anjem's family came from a long line of seers, with the distant blood of the marine mother Syrene. Three of her sisters had found success far away in places where outcasts were looked upon less harshly.

Anjem wasn't as adventurous as her sisters and knew that when the time came, she would be staying where she was.

This was why no one had been as surprised as Anjem when the hunter, Rosek, had brought a buffalo to her parents. It was an enormous male, with skin that glistened in the early morning sun. Anjem's father, though half-blind, had heard enough of the conversation between the hunter and his wife to be suspicious.

"Why do you want to marry my daughter?" the old man asked, his eyes focused on the empty space behind Rosek. "Don't you know she and her sisters are cursed?"

When Rosek replied, Anjem found herself thinking about how different he sounded from what she thought he would. His voice was like the wild and dark, each word hiding the sigh of a sleeping beast.

"I have admired your daughter from afar," admitted Rosek, his gaze steady on her face. Anjem knew he could see her from where she hid in the shadow of their kitchen, and her heart leapt with a cold desire.

"I know you and your wife may be hesitant because of my... situation, but I can promise you, I will be a good husband, and your daughter will never go hungry in my house." Rosek smiled then, an act that split his dark face open like a fresh palm kernel and made him beautiful.

Anjem knew she would still have married him even if he had never uttered a word. Rosek's curse was how unattainable he was. Better women than her had been driven mad by his banshee lover, and her fears were silenced only by her longing.

"Are you sure she shouldn't wait for the rain to stop?" Nula, Anjem's youngest sister asked on her wedding day. She was only ten, but her eyes were like those of an old woman, weary with knowledge.

"I think so. It's bad luck to go to the groom's house in the rain," added Soma, who was the most superstitious.

Anjem stared out at the flooded footpath. When the rain stopped, it would be a muddy walk. The women who had come to see her off had stopped at the gates of her home. Her mother had refused to leave the house.

"Better I don't see you before you leave. It is bad luck to cry for the bride."

Now, her sisters all waited for her decision. Anjem knew she could not bear to face the mass of anxious, superstitious women behind her. In her heart, she had already left her home.

"Nonsense," Anjem announced as cheerfully as she could muster. Her sisters all stared at her with the same adoration, their eyes shining with hope. She was the princess, all set to make a home with the prince; who was cursed but beautiful still.

She was the lucky one.

"The paths will be muddy later on, and it is almost full dark. I will leave now." Anjem kissed them all, accepting their dreams and their blessings.

"You will sleep here," Rosek informed his new bride without ceremony.

"Where will you sleep?" asked Anjem, her bravery pooling like a puddle at her feet. The room was small, furnished with just a bed, an old chest for her belongings, and a flimsy lace curtain that filtered sunlight through the window. The room looked like it had been cleaned recently.

"In the next room," answered her new husband. She searched his eyes for some hint of a joke but found none. Rosek nodded once, a small, curt gesture, and turned for the door. Anjem could feel the words on her tongue but said nothing. She bit back the disappointment and undressed in the empty room.

I am the lucky one, lucky, lucky, lucky.

Her home belonged to two people: a ghost and a witch. Anjem was merely a guest.

She realized Rosek was a spirit during the day; he barely spoke to her and opened his mouth only to make a complaint or issue a command.

At night, Anjem had to share her husband with a banshee. Most of her days with Rosek were uneventful. He accepted his meals without a word and disappeared into the room next to hers. The only days worth notice were those Anjem spent washing Rosek's increasing multitude of

bloody clothes. She took care of every thin scratch and every bruise and said nothing. In those moments, her husband seemed human again.

His body was his own, and something akin to compassion crossed his face when he saw his wife.

"What does she do for you?" Anjem asked after she had thrown the water stained pink with Rosek's blood away. He sat at the edge of her bed and said nothing.

"You could take back your heart," she whispered, afraid of the house she knew was holding its breath to listen.

"Perhaps I could," answered Rosek. He stood, leading Anjem back to his room. It was embryonic in its resemblance to hers. The room was wrong though, the smell of disuse clung to its walls.

He keeps his body here; the voice in her head said. He keeps his body here when he goes to see her.

The house sat on the edge of a small stream, a beautiful thing where silver creatures swam with the gentle current.

Anjem could see it in focus when Rosek touched her. The clay walls, with white hand-painted symbols and a small vegetable garden by the side of the house. She could smell the earth in the air, and the ground beneath her feet was so solid she had to stamp her foot to be sure.

"I can't leave her," said Rosek. Anjem could feel his hands on her, his mouth traveling down secret paths and digging in the dark, cool soil of her body. "I think we were made for one another, she and I."

The door to the house opened to reveal a woman smiling in welcome. Her hair was long and twisted, a dark curtain that curved against her full figure. Anjem dug her fingers into Rosek: his hair, his arms, and tried to concentrate on the house, the woman.

A dam inside of her burst...

The woman at the door was shrieking, her beautiful face morphing into something monstrous. She was as pale as milk, and when she screamed, the red slash of her mouth revealed a row of sharp, white teeth. Her beautiful features shrunk to resemble the scorched face of some wondrous creature.

Anjem could feel the banshee's talons around her throat, and she wanted to scream, but it seemed her voice had stepped out of her throat and gone walking.

"Do you see?" whispered Rosek. Anjem could see the blood against his cheek where the witch had struck him. Rosek's eyes were wild, his fingers digging into her arms until she gasped in pain.

A vague part of Anjem's mind wondered if this was how the other woman had loved her husband. The first one who was filled with madness now.

I am the lucky one, thought Anjem to herself as she scrubbed the floors of her kitchen and planned.

The months following her glimpse of the banshee had left Anjem terrified. She nursed Rosek back to health from a vicious fever without complaint, her hands trembling each time her skin brushed his. Anjem was afraid Rosek would die.

She prayed that a day might come when a wild beast would overpower Rosek and tear him to pieces. Perhaps his death, unlike his soundless absences and reappearances, would give her back a grip on the sanity she was losing. Anjem visited the houngan on a sunny day when Rosek had gone into the village to trade. The old witch's compound leaned in the shade of the forest, the small house swallowed by swathes of charms and animal bones.

"Mother," called Anjem from the door. The house looked abandoned.

"Who are you?" a dry voice called back from the shadow of the house.

"My name is Anjem, mother. Rosek's wife." There was a short silence before the houngan replied.

"Come."

Anjem stepped over the thin line of chalk and salt sprinkled around the threshold of the house.

"Has your status as an outcast already doomed your marriage?" the old woman sat on a small raffia mat; a calabash full of murky water in front of her.

"I come seeking only aid, mother," Anjem set a gourd of fresh palm wine in front of the houngan.

"You want to kill her?" the old woman's voice was placid, masking the surprise in her tone. A fearful silence settled over the house. When she spoke, Anjem's voice trembled.

"I am afraid she will drive me to madness...or death if I do not. Rosek cannot protect me."

"A woman before you has tried," the houngan stretched one grizzled hand towards Anjem, her palm open. Anjem placed her left hand in the woman's, her eyes on the calabash.

"You want to challenge a spirit to her claim on your husband. Is it not right to think about what you could be risking?" Anjem thought about the child, hers, and how even now it was growing inside of her. Rosek had laughed when she told him. It was impossible, he said; to even think she could carry his child.

"Why?" asked Anjem, noting the slowly fading bruises Rosek carried on his arms, his throat, his face... His whole body was a plethora of marks, evidence of how much Anjem didn't belong in his life. She understood that the rising feeling in her chest was disgust.

"I would rather the child was Anaruen's," he replied simply. Anjem nodded, her chest crushing itself like a trap around her heart. She had never heard Rosek use the banshee's name, and it was a slap of cold water on fevered skin.

"I have thought about the risks," replied Anjem calmly. "Tell me what I must do, mother." The old woman looked almost like she might refuse, but she pulled out a small bone-handled knife from the sleeve of her robes. Anjem watched the knife glide across her palm like a ghost. The blood bloomed along the cut, and the houngan held it over the calabash.

"You will need to trick her," stated the old woman. "Catch her and use this knife to cut out her heart."

"And my husband?" She concentrated on the throb of her bleeding palm, the sting that came with remembering Rosek would have preferred to know a spirit carried his child.

"Feed him this," the old woman instructed, pulling a small bottle from the sash at her waist. A dark green liquid curdled at the bottom of the bottle. It looked like blood. "This will shield you from her eyes. Then you must do what you can."

Anjem worked without thinking.

Rosek had been out hunting all day; he left before dawn and said nothing to her when she handed him his breakfast. The days following her visit to the houngan, Anjem thought she could see

suspicion in Rosek's eyes. She hardly slept, and when she woke, it was in a cold sweat with the taste of ashes in her mouth.

Anjem made dinner slowly, taking cautious glances at the bottle the old woman had given her. It seemed darker, the contents a murky shadow. She emptied it all into Rosek's food and waited for his return.

The night deepened, and there was no sign of Rosek. Perhaps the banshee had told him of her plans, and he had left her. Maybe he was waiting to sneak back under the cover of the night to murder her while she slept. Anjem forced her mind to be still. It's alright, she told herself. He will come home.

And he did. Anjem heard his heavy steps on the path before she saw him. He disappeared behind their home to the small shed where they stored everything he caught and came back in without a word. Anjem set his food in front of him and sat to watch her husband eat.

"Will you eat nothing?" Rosek asked her.

"I feel sick. I couldn't keep anything down."

The conversation ended there, and Anjem did not venture for more. When Rosek was done, she left him sitting where he was and went to her room. In truth, she was afraid her plan would fail. Something small would cause her discovery, and Rosek, in his anger, would kill her and the child she was carrying. Anjem considered doing nothing; she could turn out her lantern and sleep, forget this foolishness.

Instead, she slid out of her clothes and went back to find Rosek.

His eyes were almost black when he saw her, and Anjem knew it wouldn't be long before he fell into a deep sleep. She stood in front of him, her heart trying to claw its way up her throat.

"What are you doing?" asked Rosek heavily.

"Come to bed with me. Your child would like to know his father." Anjem reached a hand towards Rosek, and he took it. She led him to the room he shared with the banshee and lay down on the bed. Anjem closed her eyes when Rosek entered her, and when she opened them, the room had been replaced with a different scene.

The house was still there, but everything else was silent. The small stream gurgled to itself, the only sound besides Rosek's pounding heart.

Anjem walked to the house, tried the door. It opened to the banshee sitting at a small table. She was still beautiful, her dark hair curling like a living thing around her shoulders.

"I knew you would come." The banshee smiled at Anjem, but it was a flat, unpleasant thing.

"I am here for my husband," answered Anjem. She pictured Rosek's face, saw his hair and his eyes and the straight line of his mouth. She knew she loved him, and she would either kill the banshee or die from her efforts.

"Rosek is mine. Has always been. I destroyed the first woman, drove her to madness. You will follow the same path."

With that, the banshee lunged at Anjem. They tumbled to the floor; the banshee's face twisted with cold rage. Anjem could hear her shrieking; it was a sound as inhuman as the creature it belonged to. Bony hands wrapped themselves around her throat, and Anjem's vision pooled with darkness.

With one struggling hand, she scrambled for the blade she had hidden at her waist. With a last great surge of fleeting strength, Anjem buried the blade in the banshee's side and twisted. It was like opening a window into a long dark room. Her vision flooded with light, and Anjem looked down...

Her hands were slick with blood, and Rosek lay naked beside her, an ugly wound in his chest. Anjem knew she should have been afraid, sick to her stomach at the sight in front of her, but there was nothing. She stood, cradling her stomach with bloody hands.

She would go home, she thought. It would be a tragedy, her husband disappearing during a hunt, but nobody would raise suspicion against a grieving widow.

At the end of it, at least she would have her child.