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Wild

Jo

Tiny footsteps drummed on the earth as a little girl's sandal-clad feet ran through the tall grasses. The leaves rustled in the trees, the stars winked overhead, and the faint light of a town in the distance cast shadows over the night. Though small, her steps seemed to shake the earth as she ran, hammering it with her peculiar sense of joy. At her next step the girl landed in a patch of mud; her foot slid out from under her and she plunged into the dirt. She grunted, but before she could land the grass grew into the mud underneath her and caught her fragile frame on a cushion of green. When she stood, she walked slowly, and the wild grasses of the meadow bent towards her as she passed by.

Suddenly the girl cast her eyes about her and grinned; she broke into a run again, spinning in circles and raising her arms with her. This time, the forest came, too – the earth rippling under her feet in ambitious quakes, the stars shooting across the sky in rhythm with her movements and the trees throwing their arms into the air, raining fresh blossoms down atop her head. She laughed as she caught them, jumping and twirling and shaking the earth with every move.

Ha

When the wind blew in over the rocks, it was low and menacing. It shimmered like diamonds, reflecting the indigo of the night sky, and with its nimble fingers it caught the fallen leaves on the ground and tossed them up in the air so that they soared like kites, until the wind snatched them out of the air

again and they flipped, landing, with a certain ceremony, on the rocky terrain below. All through the forest the wind carved out its own place in the world. It banked low as it entered the forest, then chopped the leaves from overhanging branches, toppled the piles of rocks on the path, and forced the very trunks of the trees to bend to its will as it passed. The forest knew that the wind wanted its own path, its own title, and it shrank back from the force of its wrath. When the wind saw its power over the trees it sped up, swooping through the forest and then felling the trees with one deadly gust. After the carving occurred, the wind sauntered on its new path with arrogant strides, each threatening exhale holding the forest in position long after it had passed.

Unbeknownst to the wind, a child trailed in its footsteps, tiptoeing across the mud on sandal-clad feet, ducking behind the branches, and picking up the petals that had fallen to the ground. Each one she placed in her palm, smoothing out the frail edges and stacking them flat, chubby fingers curled delicately around her bounty.

When the wind threw back branches, the child caught them. It threw back leaves and rocks and tangles of vines that writhed on the ground like serpents. The child caught all of them, and in the torrents of fury left behind she danced: she crouched, leapt, and stretched across the expansive path to capture every remnant of the forest and return it home.

Every swoosh and billow of the wind unveiled secret choreography. It whooshed under the overhanging leaves – and the girl followed, squeezing through the opening without making a sound. Overhead, it somersaulted and ripped leaves from the trees, throwing them in the air like confetti. The girl stopped underneath and picked them up, arranging them in tiny mosaics under the tree before continuing. When the wind snuck between the branches, hunting a sliver of light just barely visible between the trees, the girl followed there, too. The forest parted for her in the same way it had bowed to the wind, reverence graced by hope rather than fear.

With each step the girl approached the wind, and when the tail ends of the wind tickled the fine hairs framing her face, her giggles chimed through the forest like bells. Her movements were erratic: two carefully placed steps here or there, then a flurry of movement and laughter as she made up the space she had given to caution. The girl advanced like a rabbit, hopping between the trees in great bouts of energy and then pausing behind them, eyes wide and head cocked. Silence...then *clink!* The forest suppressed a tremor as the girl tripped, dropping her trinkets on the rocky ground before swiping them up and sprinting after the wind. If she noticed her watchful guardian, she ignored it, eyes focused forward with wide curiosity. She picked up stones and petals as often as she left them behind, cramming them in her arms, her shirt, and under her chin before laying them into mosaics left behind on the barren earth of the wind's royal path. Each step left a barely restrained quake as she dropped some behind her, small treasures scattering underfoot or even floating for a second on the disappearing wind, their gentle falls muffled in the dirt.

Whether she did notice it or not, though, everywhere the girl went became a part of her. The trees arched around her and shielded her narrow figure, twisting into elaborate backbends to protect her from the inevitable fury up ahead. Behind her, the ground was wet, because the mud followed her path and covered each track as she forged ahead, oblivious. When the girl left the forest the trees stretched to keep covering her in shadow, but soon enough even they could not protect her from the wind any longer. Only three branches covered her as she sprinted across the grass, then two, then one, then zero. Then the moon, full and present, blared over the girl and shocked her with its spotlight gaze. It blinded her, and she reached her arm over her head as she continued to run, not stopping, never stopping. One foot landed on stone, and then two, and then the girl had slipped onto a rocky slope leading into the quarry ahead. She turned and grasped for something to hold onto, but the forest was far away and her hands only clutched mud. In a flash, the child flew into the air, ricocheting here and there and colliding with mounds of earth that skyrocketed into clouds of dust above her head. Then, the

girl crashed; a moment of breathtaking silence before she stood in the mud, feet sliding on the stones and breath turning ragged as she looked around, dazed.

Immediately, the wind was upon her. It towered over her like a dragon: wings thundering mercilessly, crushing her small form, and mouth hanging open in a fiery, indignant scream. The wind knocked the girl over again, and she fell dully back into the dirt. Her chubby hands grasped for something to hold on to, and her face burned under the hot breath of the wind as it shrieked again.

Tears sprang to her eyes, and the girl stomped her foot.

In an instant, roots and vines shot out from the forest. They rose up from the ground and climbed atop each other, wrapping together to form the menacing sculpture of a dragon made of leaves and sticks and brought to life as the wind's unmanned gusts blew its leafy wings in just the right direction.

The girl's dragon roared, and the wind swiped through its snout with razor-sharp claws. It flapped its wings, and the wind cut those, too. Then its legs, and its tail, until the dragon's mouth roared again and it advanced on the wind despite the gaping holes and severed vines.

The wind panicked and backed up as the dragon moved forward, forward, staring out at the wind with eyes made of weathered stone. It advanced on the wind, reached its face, and then – *crack!* It fell to pieces before the wind. Confused, the wind recovered quickly and preened, swishing its tail and laughing at the remains of its competition. The girl stepped forward, hidden by the wind's shadow. It continued to laugh - it blew around the trees and up, over the quarry as the girl took another step forward, then another. When she was close enough the wind spun and saw her, its glee flickering out like a flame. It bared its teeth, but the girl had already raised her arms. The ground below began to shake and then rise, and it lifted her up on a pedestal that brought her eye-level with the wind.

Kyu

The wind wasted no seconds this time. It swiped at the girl, but she dodged, jumping onto another new platform pulled up from the ground just feet away. Then the wind leapt to that pedestal, then the next, and the forest beside the quarry watched the two gods chase each other over the gap and through the neighboring meadow, scampering with poise and exhilaration even considering their sharpened talons and rocks.

The girl brought the whole world up around her as she ran, and it tremored with her power, thundering like hers were the footsteps of a giant. She began to gain on the wind, too, and it screamed in fury as it noticed her form pulling away. It swiped at the dirt rising to catch her when she leapt. The tower stumbled, and the girl landed just as it settled at half the size of the rest. The wind grinned and swiped at the next one, too, and she stumbled, bouncing off the crumbled rock and landing on the ground below. When she was vulnerable, the wind flew up and loomed over her threateningly, but the girl raised her arms again and the towers began to move inward, surrounding the wind and blocking the light of the stars overhead. The wind exploded as she caged it, ramming into the walls and bouncing off them as it fought its way back to the girl. She took one steady step back.

It screamed again, pushing and slicing against the walls as they began to crack, despite the girl's strongest effort. She took another step back, then another, sending the leaves and vines toward the wind even though she began her retreat. The wind cut them out with wide, singing swipes, advancing on the girl as she accelerated to a run across the grass. It snuck up behind her, rising over her shape and calling out threats as they hurtled forward. The wind stretched over the girl, then reached out with a pointed blast that sent her tripping so hard she landed face-first in the mud. The girl rolled over, lifting her arms and shielding them with mud hardened into stone. The wind laughed, then broke it in half. The girl kept fighting – she threw the rock at the wind, but it batted it out of the way again, and again,

until the wind reached out with one great gust and knocked the girl back into the dirt. She lay there and did not move.

Then, after a long moment, the girl opened her eyes and rose to her feet. Her cheeks were red and dirt-streaked, her eyes were bleary, but defiance shone in her face as she moved towards the wind. She held her hands low next to her, and as they swept across the land it cracked and rose up and then over her in a tsunami. Forest vines and fauna spilled over the land and marched towards the wind like an army, and even the sky began to turn dark with clouds, rolling in low, ominous claps of thunder that echoed with her steady footsteps.

The wind only needed to look at her once, then it simply ran. It ran from the forest, from the hills chasing it in deadly waves, and from the sky falling above it. The wind ran over oceans, through towns, it ripped through new forests and old ones but never stopped to make them bow. Every time it slowed, thunder clapped overhead and it heard the girl marching behind, still chasing it with vengeance.

But when it was gone, the girl simply returned to the forest at a leisurely walk. She picked up her wildflowers, sticks, and stones, arranged them under the trees in tiny mosaics, and danced by herself in the meadow. The forest worshipped her presence, and she worshipped its wildness, and that was enough.