



Ummah

A short Story

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I find myself in a cold and dark place. I am wearing the skin of animals as clothing and I know that my name is Atak. I do not know how old I am but I consider myself a man, with a wife heavy with child. I know that I am a loner, that I prefer solitude, and so it was that I took my new bride and left the safety of my village to move off and into the far plains where the tall grass grows. Here Ummah, my wife, and I established our shelter; with her at my side I hunted and together we skinned and cut the meat of my kill for our sustenance. Everything we did together, just her and I.

Ummah was tall and lithe and had the reddest hair imaginable; in my eyes no other woman I had ever seen could match her. To me she was a goddess and when I suggested that we leave our people and live alone in the land of the lost people she never complained and she never looked back, nor did she seem to miss her family, she was with me and I was with her, we were one in life; and even though thousands of years stand between her and I, convict #76603-079, I must confess that I am in love with her still.

I am waist deep in the cold wet earth, I am digging a hole. My hands and feet are near frozen and I can see my breath as it leaps from my mouth like the falling waters of a mountain stream. Drizzling rain has accumulated inside of the hole I am digging. Though the water at my feet is cold, it has not yet turned to ice, but it is deathly cold around the soles of my feet.

An old witch is standing at the rim of the hole, she is screaming at me, "Dig! Dig! You must dig! Hurry we must finish before the rise of the sun or all is lost!" I put aside the pain in my hands, the discomfort of the cold wet skins on my feet and I dig as the old witch has instructed; finally, satisfied that I understand her urgency, she moves away from the edge of the pit to continue building a large pyre.

Finishing the first hole, I climb out and begin the second. I am tired and sore, but I cannot stop. The life of my own child depends on it, so I put aside my personal discomforts and dig. Again, and again, I plunge my bone tool into the surface of the ground, but it is almost frozen and the digging is slow. I hear the old woman chanting and rattling her bones as she circles the first hole and then the second where I am steadily at work. Around and around she goes chanting and throwing powders into the flames of her pyre each time she passes by it, causing the flames to flare up and then briefly turn a greenish yellow color. In the light of the flames I see her face and it is horrid and evil looking. Her hair is matted with blood and half of her

teeth are rotted out, she has no skins upon her feet and her body is clad only in the skin of an animal, one I do not recognize, yet she is not withered, nor does she appear to be cold, and I know that I fear her, but I trust her.

The second hole is finished and I now begin to dig a tunnel between the two holes that my labor has produced. When the tunnel connecting the two holes has been completed I am covered from head to toe in ice cold mud, but what was done had to be done, a labor of love and I do not complain.

Careful not to put my weight atop the ground over the tunnel, lest my weight collapse it, I circle the two holes. While I am circling the holes from right to left and chanting, the old witch is chanting and circling me in the opposite direction leaving two distinct foot paths, hers outside of mine. When I am dizzy with exhaustion she halts her dance and falls to her knees. I do likewise. We chant a prayer to the Sun god who will soon appear to chase away the darkness that the lesser god of fire has protected us from.

With the fire blazing, with the two holes dug, with the chanting completed, and with the Sun soon to light the sky, the old witch gives me the sign that it is time to begin our ritual.

I step from our circle and enter the witches hut and bring out my woman and my sick child. We three enter the circle and then lower ourselves into the first hole in the ground, the one nearest the fire. My child has become so weak from the fever that he can no longer even cry as my woman unwraps him and exposes him to what has now become incessant rain.

I hear the voice of the witch who has by now entered the second hole, she is telling me that I must remove all of my clothing and crawl to her through the tunnel I had dug connecting the two holes in the earth. This I do. Then as prearranged, my woman Ummah gets onto her hands and knees and slides the sick body of my first child through the tunnel of mud after me. The healer woman, herself naked and on her knees, reaches into the tunnel and pulls my son through, simulating what I guess is to be a rebirth. When she has the mud covered body of my child fully in her arms she chants the magic words, makes a sign of the stars over his body, and passes him to me. I take him in my hands and lift him skyward where I hold him till the first rays of the new Sun break the top of the distant mountains revealing the power of the Sun god. "It is done," says the old woman and I lower my son into my arms and kiss his wet, muddy face.

My woman, now standing on the edge above me beckons and I pass the child up to her, she wraps him and pulls him to her chest in an effort to warm him, and in spite of the rain I can see tears running down her face.

"The fever will not kill him, but you will die seven times," says the witch to my woman.

"I would die a thousand times to give just one life to my child," I interjected and meant what I had said.

The old woman leaned over and took a handful of the mud at her feet and then looked me in the eyes and says, "Not a thousand deaths and not an eternal life." She then turned towards the darkness, made a sign to ward off evil and went to her hut leaving my woman and I alone with the child and her mysterious prophecy.

By mid afternoon that very day my child began to show signs of improvement and by the following day when we had returned to our land, all was well, and he was up and running around as if nothing had ever happened, as if he had never been sick at all.

Over the next few weeks my first born not only regained his strength, but his vigor as well. As a sign of gratitude, every full moon thereafter I walked the great distance and left a gift of the hunt at the fire pit of the old witch who's magic had saved the life of my child.

The year after that my woman gave birth to another child and a year after that another. All in all, we had four sons and one daughter with green eyes like her mother and in our isolation we grew into a family and prospered. All seemed to be well and the words of the witch were forgotten.

The winter after my last child was born was the worst that any of us had ever seen. Long about the third moon of that winter came a snow storm so fierce that my whole shelter was buried up to the top of the roofing beams. Now this was not all that unusual, but what was unusual was that unlike past storms, which were always followed by a warm spell, this storm brought only colder air as its companion, air that whipped this way and that, bringing with it a chill to my earth mound homestead like none ever felt before.

It had been many days upon days and the storm continued, then after a week or so the storm stopped as abruptly as it had started and I left my shelter in search of food. All day I searched, but so fierce was the cold that I searched without success.

That night we finished the last of our stored provisions and later that night without dry wood our fire died. That night Ummah and my children huddled together beneath our hides and to the warmth of one another, in the morning I was relieved to find them still with breath. I vowed to find dry wood to warm our fires first thing that day. Food would have to wait.

After long hours of work I procured enough wood and cut it into manageable pieces and took it to my shelter where the lesser god of fire blessed us with his warmth; I thanked him and asked him to keep us warm until the great father in the sky chose to once again bring his warm light to this land of my choosing.

After the fire was burning well I went in search of food and when none could be found I made the long journey to the shelter of the witch, hoping that she might give me the wisdom to find the beasts of the field and thereby feed my family. But once there I found the old crone sitting cross-legged with her head tilted upwards looking past a burnt out fire and into an overcast horizon covered with snow. She was frozen in acolyte immortality. I made a sign to ward off any evil that might be on the witch's property, then I took what little food I found in her hut and put it in my sack.

I left the place of the witch without moving or touching her because I did not know her preference in death; some of my people preferred the fire and others preferred the earth. Fearing that I would choose wrong and thereby cause her spirit to be forever earthbound, I let her be and trusted her spirit to the gods.

I looked out across the lands on which I had chosen to live and saw that where there had once been never-ending fields of grassland full of critters and herd upon herd of beast, there now stood nothing except white snow for as far as a man could see. The snow I did not mind, the problem was that it was so cold that the animals had moved away from the storm or died, I did not know which, but I did know that they were gone. Never in the history of my clan had this happened.

Another day without food, then another and another and after what proved to be another unsuccessful forage I returned to watch my youngest child die before my very eyes and in my very arms. I wept. My woman hardened by the life we had chosen did not show any outward signs of sorrow and when I began to rock back and forth in my own misery, refusing to let go of the limp body of my dead child, she slapped me across the face and said to me, "Green eyes, is gone." I lowered my head in shame and then nodded with understanding, then I took her body outside where I put her to the long sleep of fire.

More days followed and still no food. Another storm came and my children fell into constant sleep; seldom were they awake at all now. I knew that they were weak from lack of food... but what could I do except go outside and search once again for some form of nourishment? I found nothing.

I began to look for alternative means of food, I tried to remember what the animals ate and all I could think of was roots and grass, so I dug through the snow and searched and searched until I found frozen grass and then roots and then bugs. These things I gathered and took to my woman who then mashed them into a paste and fed them to the children, but they were so weak that they could not even eat

what she gave them and that night another storm came and covered our shelter and I was beset with fear and grief.

That night another one of my children began to cough and cry without ceasing and all I could do was watch as Ummah held him and rocked him and talked to him; but he continued to cry and then so too did the others. Days followed and my children suffered. Days followed days and my children starved before my very eyes.

After what seemed like an eternity my woman, who seemed to be the strongest of us, came to me and aroused me and loved me. When she finished I lay down beside the fire and fell asleep and slept till I felt her straddle my chest. Bewildered I awoke to look into her eyes and saw that tears had cut pathways through the dried blood that covered her face. I tried to rise but she put her cutting tool to my throat and told me to be still. I did not understand, but I did not move either.

The sobs of our children were gone, our shelter was quiet, I could hear nothing except the crackling of the fire as it did what fires do, and the lights of comprehension came to me. And somewhere in that silence, came acceptance, as my beloved Ummay took my life.

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