

## In the Circle

By Donna Dormeus

The sun was setting, and her father hadn't come back yet.

The grass tickled the backs of Isadora's legs as she sat crisscross in the clearing. Alone in the open field, the ball of worry in her chest grew as the sun continued its descent behind the trees.

He always came back before the sunset.

Isadora stood, brushing grass and ants off her pale blue dress, and ventured as close to the edge of the woods as she'd ever been. Peering into the intense darkness between the giant trees, she strained her eyes to see if she could make out the form of her father walking back. It was their daily tradition, he would go into the forest to collect wood for the fire, and she would wait on the edge of the clearing for him to come back.

She was never allowed any farther than the clearing.

"The forest is a dangerous place, Isa," Her father always said, deep voice lecturing her every day as she took her spot to wait for him. "Creatures live in them trees that would love the chance to eat a little girl like you whole."

Isadora would always laugh at his big bad wolf impression, but she knew he was right. More than one person had entered the woods before sunset and never returned. Her mother one of them.

The sun had almost disappeared on the horizon and darkness was creeping into the edges of the fading sunset. It was deadly to be out after dark, but she had always waited for her father to come back before walking home. She dared to move slightly closer to the forest's edge, closer than her father would ever allow. Even the minor change in distance was too much. The woods were cold, though the night was warm. The fading daylight made the shadows of the trees stretch long over the grass, the darkness of the woods itself seem to stretch out and reach for her.

“Dad?” Her tiny voice barely cut through the deep quiet the trees insisted on. When no man came bursting out of the treescape full of apologies for making her wait, Isadora finally let her fear engulf her. A desperate heat started to rise on her neck and cheeks as the powerful urge to cry overtook her. Hot tears streamed down her face, clouding her vision of the trees. Isadora backed away from the edge of the forest, far enough from the outstretched tree shadows that they couldn’t grab her and drag her in. She plopped down hard on to the grass and buried her tear-stained face in her hands. Content to sit and sob until either her father came back or the night took her, Isadora heard his chastising voice in her mind.

“Now what did all that cryin ever solve, Isa?” Her father chided her the last time she cried like this. “Not a goddamn thing that’s what. Our people don’t cry, Isa. We fix.”

Now, remembering her father’s words, Isadora felt silly crying in the dark like a little girl who didn’t know better. She quickly wiped her face and stood up, turning her back on the trees, determined to find the solution her father said always existed.

She looked for the stone path he made years ago.

“The stones lead home,” He grunted, laying down another flat stone that was as big as she was, and pushing it deep in the dirt path he had cleared. He had drawn a small protection sigil that someone gave him on the bottom of each rock. “That way, if you ever get lost, you’ll know your way back to me.”

Isadora wasn’t lost now, but the familiar path brought her some comfort.

Their house was the farthest from the rest of the village, closer to the woods than most other families dared to live. It was never a far walk when she was with her father, who would often tell her tall tales of the fairy dances he saw on his journey into the woods.

“But fairies ain’t real daddy.” Isadora giggled, the one piece of wood she was tasked to carry almost slipping out of her grip.

“Now who woulda told you a stupid thing like that.” He said, shifting his large bundle of firewood from one shoulder to the other.

The walk home was longer by herself. Isadora could still feel the darkness of the trees at her back and walked faster trying to outrun the night time. She reached home just before the last bits of sun left the sky. The door closed and locked firmly behind her, she ran around with a match lighting every lantern they had, only burning herself a few times in the process. She lit the fireplace last.

That night Isadora climbed into her father’s bed instead of her own. She remembered all the stories she heard about why people vanished into the woods. That people like her mother were crazy or foolish or both. Her father often said they lost themselves because they entered the woods with no purpose. That’s why her father was so adamant that she stayed away.

“There ain’t nothing for you in them trees,” He said on one of their walks to the clearing. “The quickest way to get lost is to go in there searching for nothing.”

A purpose would get you back out without incident, that’s how he went in every day and still came out alive. Every day, except today.

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Isadora had no idea of what to bring on a journey into the woods, she spent most of that morning searching the house for extra supplies while braiding her poufy hair flat against her scalp. Inside her pack was a few servings of bread and cheese, some water, a kitchen knife, and a lantern. When she left the house, she felt prepared to take on anything the forest could offer. Now standing at the edge of the tree line, she just felt silly. The helpless tears she had been fighting since last night boiled up in her chest again. Every lesson her father taught her about avoiding the forest played in her head on a constant loop.

Eyes closed, Isadora took a step in.

The moment she stepped beyond the tree line all her thoughts calmed. Like a thick blanket over her mind, the quiet of the woods permeated her ears and found residence inside her head.

She started walking.

The forest had no path to follow, so she walked blindly forward, lantern held out to illuminate her way. Isadora hadn't gone deep into the forest when she heard a faint sound. She almost stumbled on the dancers before she recognized the hypnotic sounds as music. Pulling the shade down on her lantern, she hid behind a large tree peeking out to see the festivities.

People were dancing in a circle around a roaring fire, some with hands interlocked, others spinning in circles on their own. Each one with a radiant smile on their face. The music was lively and lovely, though she saw no one with any instruments. She felt a deep urge to join the smiling dancing people, forget all her troubles, and take part in the revelry. The longer she watched, the harder it became to remember why she was hiding behind the tree and not dancing away her worries.

Isadora was seconds away from leaving her hiding spot when she recognized one of the revelers. Clad in all the clothes he left wearing the previous day except for his shoes, her father was dancing as she had never seen him dance before. Wild and unabashed.

The shock seeing her father again, dancing like a mad man, shattered the glamour over her eyes.

There was no fire.

No music.

Most of the dancers Isadora thought were smiling or laughing were crying. Some screaming. Many had clothes worn through at the thighs and arms from dancing, and most had a bloody mess where their feet should have been. Human remains littered the ground, and the dancers danced over bones. The two dancers who didn't look at death's door didn't look like any people she'd ever met before. Incredibly tall with shock white skin and hair, they were the only ones enjoying the horrific forest ball. Unlike the other revelers, her father was not facing towards the rest of the circle. His gaze was firmly on the face

of the dark-skinned woman whose hands he held. The woman looked like she had been dancing for years, body thin and skeletal, but her father still looked at her like she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.

Isadora was at the edge of the circle before she realized she was running.

“Dad! Daddy! Please, I’m here!” She screamed out to him, trying to break his reverie. Closer to the circle, she could feel whatever magic kept the people dancing start to wash over her again. She felt the warmth of the false fire on her face, and the music had started again in the back of her mind.

He couldn’t hear her screams over the music that wasn’t playing.

The rotation of the dancing circle brought him to her. When he was within her arm’s reach, she grabbed the back of his pant legs and threw all her weight backward, away from the strange monsters and their dance. Her desperate pull was enough to throw him off balance. Enough to make him fall on his back out of the circle.

He immediately struggled to get back up. To go back to the hellish dance. To join the dark-skinned woman again.

Isadora sat on his chest, grabbing his face with her hands, making her face fill his vision. It took minutes of struggling for his eyes to focus on her face. Once they did, recognition slowly replaced the confusion behind them. His struggle slowed and then stopped as the glamor fell away from him.

When her father got his bearings, he grabbed her and immediately moved them back as far from the circle as his energy could get them. Back against a tree, he held her in his arms, apologies pouring from his lips like water from a well.

Isadora turned back to the woman who was with her father, beautiful and exhausted, she was still dancing. Tears dripping down her face.

