

## The Witch

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The big house had become much too much for her—too heavy, too imposing, and with too much history. In the Great Hall the Great Tapestry, encoded and illuminated with the events of generations of halcyon nights, mildewed in the damp silence. The furniture needed polishing, cupboards cleaned out, but the servants were not inclined, and she was unable to incline them. Even the gargoyles along the front portico had grown listless—and for months now—hardly acknowledging her on those rare occasions when she felt strong enough to venture out nights in her carriage and four.

Few visitors came round, and none were being invited. She hadn't called a Grand Council in... well, she was not sure. In the labyrinthine catacombs three levels below the great hall she still kept a few mortals—feeding them, just in case things were to turn around. But she had half a mind to let them rot, maybe even let them go. Recently one of her hounds hemorrhaged—heart burst, just like that—unimaginable, such a large, uncontrolled loss of something so valuable.

In recent months myriad varieties of lush foliage had menacingly reached the outer parameters of the mansion's foundation. A few seasons back, the first wildflowers had appeared. Here and there on the great expanse that fronted the grounds, clover was sprouting, wild grasses were spreading. It was all too disturbing. When she was informed that one of the wretched dungeon dwellers knew some gardening, she offered him his freedom if he could stop the spread of the green plight. He tried his best but failed, so she handed him over to the jackals to have their way with him.

She needed a sign. Well, she needed a good sign—she wasn't keen on more bad news—for the old incantations that had served her so well were no longer effective. She searched the Great Library (she hadn't read in years), but her knowledge of dead languages was rudimentary at best, and it wasn't in her temperament to spend long hours parsing sentences and thumbing through dictionaries.

She had toyed with the idea of going north, where, she'd heard, covens were starting up anew amongst the population. Maybe she could tutor, instruct. Maybe. No. The mere idea drained her. Mortals...imbeciles.

Then one night she had a dream, and in the dream was a sign. Was it a sign?...surely. She would feign her own death, then join Him, her Belovéd. (He was always asking. Such a dear.) She'd create a spectacle of it—send out invitations, design them herself (she had a knack)—an extravaganza, something for the books, have it last a month, maybe longer. Every hour planned. She could bring up the mortals from below, have them help clean the place, then fatten them up and dress them out—put them on the menu. She pitched the idea to the staff. Everyone was delighted.

It took some time to get things ready, and through it all the invitations were sent out. A week or so before the festivities were to begin, guests started arriving: white witches from the north, red witches from the south, wizards famous and infamous, legendary knights thought to have died in battle long ago, imps and pimps, whores and harlots, misfits and outcasts, they came by the thousands.

Once things got started, it wasn't long before all the planning and programming of events went out the window. As the days and weeks passed, more and more guests arrived and joined in the pandemonium—until, finally, she'd had enough. It would be now or never. So right at the height of the festivities on the second day of the third week, at half past the twenty-second hour of the day (which once had held some kind of meaning for her), she flew to the top of the great hall, whirled around to face the gluttonous throng below, whipped out from beneath her black robes a silver bladed, ivory handled scimitar, and in one smooth movement severed her head from her body. A great cheer went up from the crowd and the mass of partygoers scrambled to clear a space as the head and body plummeted to the floor.

Well, they cleaned up the mess, boiled up the remains, and had a special banquet in her honor. And when the food and drink ran out the revelers began their departures, each with his or her own kind. And after the last of the guests had left the staff packed up and headed north themselves.

The place sat empty for about a year, until one day when a duke showed up with his entourage. Discovering the doors unlatched and many of the windows open (or broken) the royal company reconnoitered the rooms, marveling at the grandeur of the place, the mess left by the rabble, and the dazzling splendor of the grounds: wildflowers, wooded parks, and plentiful game.

Today, five generations of the duke's descendents have lived on the estate. A legend about a witch living there has been passed on from one generation to the next. It's just a legend of course. No one takes these things seriously.