

The Witching Hour

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Jethric rode his horse quickly through the darkness, his heart beating faster, his mind racing. He looked up at the moon, so high in the night sky, and the cougar felt his nervousness growing. Cursing himself once again for his mistake, he pushed onward. He knew must get there soon, there was no time to waste.

He'd been gone for several days. As he was a merchant, his job kept him away like that sometimes, traveling to other towns for the exchanging of the goods he provided. He didn't like leaving his wife Bess alone like that, but it couldn't be helped. His latest trip had been longer than usual, but business had required it. It had been a profitable trip, but that didn't matter if he couldn't get there in time.

He'd realized the situation, perhaps too late, and had raced home to meet with Bess, only to find an empty house. She'd gone to the meeting of the witches, to join in with their ritual. How could he have forgotten that tonight was the night of their gathering? Tonight of all nights he should have been home with his wife, not leaving her alone as he had.

Looking up at the sky once again, he saw the moon was nearing its zenith, rising in the glory of its fullness. Soon it would be the hour of the ritual. He had to get there, time was running out quickly. She couldn't be alone like that, he had to get to her. Giving the reins another quick shake, he urged his horse on. Feeling the slight burst of speed from the steed he was already pushing at a steady gallop, he felt his heart beating faster.

If he got there too late, could he stop them? Could he hold back the ritual? He didn't know, but he had to try. He had to get to Bess before it was too late, that was the single thought which kept running through his anxious mind.

Why did he have to go and leave her alone for so long like that? Of course he knew his job was dependant on it. In truthfulness it hadn't even been all that long, but it had still felt too long to him. They'd been married barely a year and his time away from her was noticed very much. He'd hoped that they might have a child soon, but even as he rushed to her, he realized it might be too late for that.

His mind flying widely, he thought of the ritual the witches would soon be conducting. In fact they might even be starting it at that very moment, as he rode towards their gathering place. Desperate to reach her, he sped on the through wilderness, the moon lighting his way, casting its pale glow over the landscape.

His pulse racing, his anxious thoughts pushing him onwards, he finally rounded a bend to see the glimmering flames of the fire off in the distance. His ears perking up with excitement, he drove his horse onwards. His tail twitching anxiously, he felt the sense of urgency increase, boiling up within him as he watched the glow of the fire drawing closer. He just had to make it in time.

He rode towards the flat open space of the witches' nocturnal meetings at a break-neck speed.

Watching the fire, its flames shimmering in the darkness, he saw the shapes of the figures resolving themselves from shadowy outlines. Drawing nearer, he saw they were dancing around the fire. Coming closer still, he heard their chanting. A shock ran through him as he realized that the ritual had begun. Even with all of his efforts, had he come too late?

He brought his horse to a quick stop and dismounted quickly, leaving the beast a short distance outside the mystic circle. There were several other horses and wagons nearby, but he paid little attention to them. Instead his thoughts were focused on the small crowd before him. The ritual already started, they hadn't noticed his arrival. Instead their attentions were focused on the dancing flames they were moving around, and the words of their chanting.

Bess, he thought frantically. He had to find her, and quickly. He rushed forward, towards the congregation, searching desperately for his wife. He soon found an opening and forced his way into it, entering the circle of witches. A moment later everything hushed, his presence finally noted, every member of the group stopped to turn and look at him. Now their attentions were focused on the man who'd interrupted their plans.

His ears drooping and his tail hanging limply behind him, he looked upon the silent eyes of those watching him. It was then when he noticed their leader, a badger dressed in a long robe, looking at him. The black mask of her face lit up by the flickering glow of the fire, she studied him silently. He swallowed hard, his ears laid low against his head, and just stood there, fearful of her response to his disrupting the ceremony.

The brief moments she stared at him ticked on slowly, punctuated by his every heartbeat as he watched her looking back upon him, her face stoic. How dare he break up a sacred ritual because of his own foolishness?

"Ah, it's good to see you Jethric" the priestess finally spoke, her expression softening slightly.

"I'm sorry I'm late Ashton," he answered, giving her a formal bow, his nervousness slowly abating. "I was worried I was going to miss it."

"We were worried as well, you nearly did miss it" she replied. "Bess told us you were late returning from your business trip and we knew how important this was for you." As she finished, a small smile crept across her muzzle.

The brown bear standing next to her then spoke. "We'd just begun when you'd interrupted us Jethric, so if you'd join your wife we can get started again without any further delays." The firelight sparkled in the bear's eyes as he smirked at the cougar.

Jethric nodded sheepishly to the two of them, priestess and priest, and scanned the group for Bess. He soon found her, his pretty feline standing next to the lupine forms of the village butcher and his wife. She looked a little embarrassed for the both of them, but also relieved to see that he'd finally arrived. As he walked to her, he saw her face lighting up with a warm smile, which made the amused grins and wagging tails of the others in the congregation much easier to ignore.

"Oh Jethric, you made it" she exclaimed as she threw her arms around him.

"Of course I did, love," he replied, holding her tightly. "There's no way I'd miss our first

fertility ritual."

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