

Fenris and the Ghost



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Of all the stories Father and Mother told Fenris, the one about the Ghost haunted his dreams the most. Rumor had it: She stirred the souls of forest elemental dragons in a cauldron every night, brewing them to fuel ghastly spells with which she hexed the farms and fostered the nightmares of the kingdom. Rumor had it: She stalked stray forest elemental dragons in the night, kidnapping them and adding their spirits to her witch's brew.

How Fenris had nightmares of the Ghost! On some nights he would lay wide awake so that she could not enter his dreams, where her terrible roars and bursts of laughter would swallow the woods; where she would chase the dragons of the kingdom endlessly, and poison all their plum patches and eat all their prize pumpkins.

"Your Father and I will make sure she'll never lay a claw on you," Mother assured him one sleepless night, when he had fled to her with chills.

Of course, Mother was mandated to say such things. And so his insomnia worsened for several fortnights after his first Ghost story.

So one evening, Fenris, afraid the Ghost would again fester from his Zs that night, decided he must be brave: And so the emerald dragon, of belly and of chin frills and of tail-spade and of wing membranes honey topaz, unbolted his locked chest with a talon. Into it he rummaged. Out of it he removed a drumlin of dark bronze armor, and quickly donned it. Its helm masked his snout and shielded his horns and frills; its many pieces guarded his spine and padded his shoulders and protected his pasterns. He was not just dazzling; he was dangerous—he was Father Nature!

"After I vanquish this Ghost," he said, pawing fast past cabins of log—zagging through the dirt-paved streets, "everyone will have good dreams again: dreams where there's lots of pumpkins."

And so stole Father Nature through the kingdom, and out of its wooden gates; and the dragons farming, piqued, stopped ploughing their fields to

watch him go. They wondered what Fenris was up to. So did the guards at the wall.

Stories of the Ghost entailed one acre of the woods, where she was said to lodge. It was also said that her arachnid pets would bite off the limbs of any who trespassed. With relief Father Nature found the haunted cabin, for it was unguarded by spiders of any kind. He would need to leave before they returned from chasing off the last encroacher, though.

At the door he bravely sucked in breath. He then stomped a forepaw through the threshold, pounced inside and yelled blindly, “Foul Ghost! Your days of frightening my kind end to—”

“A forest elemental dragon?”

Before the question was finished, Father Nature felt a squeal fly out of his throat. It flung him to the floorboards. He thought, surely, he’d blown his chance of living with this blunder. But when he blinked his eyes, behind a cauldron and a stirring stick stood blinking ... a *beauty*. She was a dragon, like him, but a *dragoness*. And she had scales and feathery wings and tail feathers white like primrose petals. And her talons were a pretty gold, like the pistils inside of primroses. Brilliant turquoise eyes considered him below gold-plated brows and a sextuplet of golden horns.

“You’re not a Ghost,” Fenris breathed.

She became serenely still, blinked. A teardrop rippled the surface of the turquoise elixir in her cauldron. “No,” she said, “but people tend to believe that I am before they can see that I am not.” She giggled. The soft sound that filled the cabin was sweet and sad.

Fenris felt both sorry and ashamed, and he began to pull off his helm.

“No,” she said. “You look fearless. It is a look on you that I like.”

“Okay,” said Fenris in a small voice.

“I’m Alaytha.”

“I’m Fa—I’m Fenris. Hi.” He got up and looked in her pot. “What are you making?”

“A fertilizer.” She was stirring a glowing, steaming mulch. “It is a special one, and it keeps my garden thriving. And the trees, they like it as well.”

“You don’t use the souls of dragons to make it, do you?”

For a second she looked profoundly offended, but then she just looked profound. Suddenly, she bobbed her head with a bawl of laughter that blanketed the rafters of the room with her wings. No longer did he look quite as embarrassed: He started to laugh too—just a little.

“The insides of cyre nuts—”

“—are poisonous,” Fenris finished.

“Yes, no.”

“Yes no?”

“If you eat them, yes. That is because their mulch is so rich in nutrients.”

“But if it’s bad, how is it healthy?”

“Nothing really is bad if bad at all. It’s just ... how you stir it. With this cauldron, I distill the mulch with some born berries and some astern herbs, and once the elixir has simmered a while, the smell is very pleasant.”

“Like now!”

As an answer she stopped stirring. She inhaled deeply, then breathed out slow and then seemed meditatively restored.

“And it is done. We can bring the cauldron out to cool. Would you like to see my garden?”

Fenris hammered a nod with a happy snort.

They partnered up to bring the pot heavy out back. When they placed it down, Fenris raised his head and saw a farm of giant fruits and veggies. It

had even a patch of ginormous pumpkins. Only five lay in it, but each one went up to his dragon shoulders. They could feed a hundred thousand humans, he guessed.

“This is fantastical,” Fenris said, eyes glimmering. “The mulch can make everything grow so huge, and yet no one in my kingdom knows anything about it.”

“I think they know about it,” said Alaytha, plucking tomatoes into a basket, “but they consider the mulch, and a many more common knowledges of my parent clan, to be kinds of witchcraft.”

“You have a clan? Why do you live here alone, and not with your family and friends?”

“When I grew to the age of dragonet, a fourth pair of horns—a smallest pair of horns—was supposed to grow between my big ones. I don’t know why, but they didn’t. A six-horned dragoness is the greatest bad omen in the eyes of white dragons. And so, to dragons, I am a Ghost or I am evil. With the trees and with my garden, I at least have ... some benign company. They do not drive me away with talons or fangs. They are pleasant and delicious to my senses. They are ... my friends ... I suppose.”

The more Alaytha talked, the more wistful her voice became.

She turned toward Fenris, paced to him with her eyes at his feet. She handed him a full basket of tomatoes.

“Thank you for visiting. I forgot that dragons have such fair voices. They are like smooth polished stones. Please come share your pleasant voice again with me, sometime, Fenris.”

Fenris took the tomato basket, frowning. “How did you forget? You have a voice. You’re a dragon.”

She tried pensively to smile. “Things that go unstirred are forgotten, I guess. This one has been quiet for as long as the trees have been her kindest

company.”

“No,” Fenris breathed. He hugged her tight, spilling many tomatoes from his basket. “I don’t want you to forget your voice. You deserve to stir it as much as you want. And you deserve to have friends—friends you can stir it to, who will stir their voices back.”

“Fenris ...”

“Come with me to my kingdom. It’s full of farmers and calm dragons, like you. And when they know that you’re Alaytha and not a Ghost, they’ll be good friends with you. You’ll be with dragons, like you always should have been.”

Alaytha felt her heart flutter and expand, as well as the feathery span of her wings. Without thinking it, she rose and slowly wrapped her forelegs around Fenris. He patted her back, and her head rocked, and tears streaked and glistened down his armor.

“What will they say of a dragon who returns with a Ghost?”

“ ‘No Ghost,’ this dragon will say ... ‘No Ghost.’ ”

She tried to pat his back too, then pulled away.

“Your armor.”

He studied her, understood her, then removed the bronze guise of Father Nature. Her eyes swelled jubilantly, and she embraced him fully.

“Brave with, brave without,” she said. “Thank you for being so brave.”

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What would have done the forest elemental dragons if Fenris had led a Ghost into the kingdom, when the only light came from candles in window sills? They would have freaked; frenzies of them would have driven the Ghost far away. And *that* was if he and Alaytha somehow slipped past the guards.

So instead of going home that night, he snuggled with her in her toasty

cabin until sleep charioted them away. In his dreams they were laughing and chasing each other through the woods; and once they had their fun they went to her farm to fill their bellies with succulent plums and prize pumpkins.

When they woke up, at first light he took her to the kingdom gates, carrying a backpack full of tomatoes. The guards were snoring raucously with booze bottles around them, so they slipped right in.

“Mother! Father!”

This Fenris yelled as he banged on the door of his home. He tried the knob again, but the door was bolted shut, even though it never normally was when they were waiting for his return.

“Oh no,” Fenris moaned. “They’re not waiting anymore. Do they think I died? Did they get mad at me for going past curfew and disown me?”

“You say the silliest things.” She nuzzled him reasonably. “Parents disown their children for being six-horned, or for being unable to bare offspring, not for being independent.”

“Then why won’t they open the door?”

When Alaytha opened her mouth, someone bellowed, “*Them!*”

“The Ghost and Fenris!”

“She’s got him possessed!”

Whirling around, Fenris and Alaytha faced a gang of Fenris’ neighbors. Egon, Karsten and Ursula frantically palavared forward, and presently cornered them with their adult dragon bignesses.

“Are my Father and Mother home?” squeaked Fenris.

“YOU WOULD ASK THAT,” whooped Egon. “A POSSESSED DRAGON WOULD WANT TO KNOW WHERE HIS PARENTS ARE SO THAT HE CAN FEED THEIR SOULS TO THE GHOST.”

“*Lambasted lizard-gryph!*” Karsten twirled, starting to swoon. “The ghost *has* got him—the poor young dragon—”

Ursula balled a forepaw. “We shan’t give up on him. With luck she’s just puppeteering his soul; p’raps she’s not gotten round to the stewing of it, yet. If we all pounce on her, we can pull on her ectoplasmic feathers till she submits to the three’vus and pawns off his free-will.”

The owners of the hostile voices approached Alaytha, and she curled into a ball. From her throat resonated a periled cry. The sound was bewitching: It filled the kingdom, and sired in the kingdom’s dragons a feeling of bittersweetness.

The sound dazed the adults, but did not deter them; they thought it to be an assault of witchery on their will, and would not relent to it. They dashed at her, and reached out to seize her feathers, but suddenly Fenris fell upon her, and with his wings he cloaked her protectively.

“No Ghost! *No Ghost!*”

His cry caused the adults to trip and to slump on their bellies.

“Her name is Alaytha,” said Fenris, “and I am her invincible armor. Don’t you dare think of striking me! Your blows will bounce back and break your bones into a fine dust.”

As he spoke, the spirit of Father Nature gave him courage and his words believability. And so the adults crawled away, rattled by his theatre.

“Unconvinced,” grunted Egon.

Karsten was shivering. “If not a Ghost, what in the dove-tailed haze is she?”

Ursula got up. “Any which way, Fenris has her pinned, and we’ve her surrounded, so his soul should be alright till his parents are over. I’ll seek ‘em out.”

She left, and Fenris heaved a sigh. “Thank you.”

In good humor, Alaytha mumbled below him, “You called the dragons here ‘calm.’ ”

“Everyone gets excited about something,” he said.

“Especially Ghosts!” blurted Karsten. “I get my gooseprickles to jackhammer just heckling about them. Rrf! And all this excitement has made me hungry for a corn on the cob. I like pepper on my cobs.”

“Sorry, I haven’t any cobs,” Fenris said. Then, he remembered, “I *did* bring some tomatoes I was gonna share with Father and Mother. I guess you can have one. They’re in my backpack. Can you put one in my mouth? I’m busy being Alaytha’s armor.”

“Tomatoes!” cheered Karsten. He got up and fumbled a paw inside of Fenris’ pack.

With all the poison of a cynic, Egon spat: “That’s what a Ghost-Witch would WANT you to do: GOBBLE UP HER ENCHANTED FRUITS TO VENTRILOQUIZE YOU.”

“If you are afraid, I will eat a tomato too,” said Alaytha. “It is time for this one’s tummy, anyway.”

“See that?” Karsten asked Egon. “A Ghost can’t string herself up. And if a Ghost tried to eat a tomato, it’d fall right out, so I can’t fashion to say she *is* one. Now, all that Ghost talk has starved me. Might I have two tomatoes?”

Alaytha nodded happily. Everyone but Egon eagerly devoured a tomato meal.

Soon, many forest elemental dragons of the kingdom gathered around Alaytha and Fenris, for they had heard a cry of peril and were curious as to what or who had produced it.

“What’s going on here?” one of them asked.

It was a queer sight: One young dragon was cuddling the back of a pretty white one in the middle of the street, and they were licking what smelled like tomato juice off their lips, and so was one adult dragon next to them. A second adult dragon lay farther away, skeptically perusing the

picnickers.

When the many dragons came, he piped up: “I would keep an eye on these three if I were you.”

“Hello, dragons,” said the white dragoness. “I’m Alaytha.”

“Hi Alaytha,” said the many dragons, with quizzical looks.

“We’re eating tomatoes,” Fenris replied. “Everyone, Alaytha is the one everyone thought was a Ghost, but she’s a dragon, just like us. And she’s sweeter than all of her tomatoes put together—she has a *heck* of a lot of tomatoes.”

One dragon asked, “Is this true, Alaytha? If you’ve so many tomatoes, then you must be a farmer like us forest elemental dragons.”

The many dragons murmured agreement. Alaytha’s mouth gaped at the sound of her name. There came a gale of rapture which beat her wings out from underneath Fenris’. She ascended as high as three stacked dragons with Fenris aboard, and then with a feathery upthrust freed an exultant roar! She presently alighted with an elegant giddiness, then tackled the asker dragon with a hug. Fenris gave an oof on the ground.

“I have giant fruits and vegetables of all kinds. You can help me eat them before they decompose.” Twisting her neck, she beamed sincerely at the dragons. “All of you.”

She released the purring dragon, then scampered around Fenris in a half circle and then galloped for the gates.

“You all are welcome at my garden!”

She did not look back, knowing that Fenris was right behind her, racing after her; hoping that the many dragons were too. First, the drumming of feet was hers and Fenris’ alone, but then, two dragons trumpeted from their gullets, and then winged proudly after them; and so did another dragon—and another!; and then rejoicing dragons on the street stampeded after them. She

and Fenris led a speedy parade of kingdom and of sky through and over the kingdom gates, and past the gambling guards; and then through the woods, and past an astonished Father and Mother and Ursula; then they arrived in the garden.

There, Alaytha and Fenris and the gathered forest elemental dragons sat on the loam. Some sat on great pumpkins. They feasted mostly on slices of pumpkin spiced with cinnamon, cloves and vanilla, but they ate other large fruits and vegetables as well. Karsten lay with a distended belly and with many finished corn cobs around him. He hiccuped happily. Egon grumpily took his first nibble of a tomato: Its taste appealed to him so much, he scarfed down the rest.

“Fine, I’m convinced!”

Lured by the procession, Father and Mother and Ursula found Fenris and Alaytha. They were pecking at the meat of a shared pumpkin slice.

Fenris dropped the pumpkin guts in his mouth, wide-eyed. He and his parents raced forward, then launched hugs.

“Fenris,” Mother choked, “we were worried sick—haven’t stopped looking for you since last night.”

“What’s all this feasting about?” Father demanded. “And this friend of yours—who’s she?”

“Mother said you and her would never let her lay a claw on me. But I’m glad you did. And the dragons, they’re glad to know her, like me, and so it’s pumpkin time. Please don’t bite her or slash at her or disown me.”

Mother raised a golden brow at Ursula. “I would only think of doing such things to our neighbors, who seem to respond to Ghost stories as extremely as our son.”

Ursula looked away from the chastising glare. “I’m glad that we were wrong.”

“Darn straight you were,” said Father. “Fenris, what have you to say for yourself?”

“I’m really sorry for being out so long. Does this mean Alaytha and I can’t have sleepovers anymore?”

“I don’t know: What does your Mother think?”

“I think Alaytha is a fine name,” she said, “and so long as you ask us before you go running off, I shall be fine with it.”

When this was said, Fenris and Alaytha jumped up with a great “YAY!” of two, and swirled with wing beats of jubilee round each other. They seemed to do so until they were curled around each other in Fenris’ room, fast asleep.

From then on, the Ghost who was not a Ghost had many friends. Many fair voices were shared with her. There were the voices of the trees, and there was the voice of her garden. And then, there were the voices of the forest elemental dragons, the voice of Fenris, and the voice of herself: voices that were like smooth polished stones.