

The Word Witch

by Scott Cimarusti

for Sandy

The first time he had encountered the Word Witch was when he was eleven years old.

He had been doing what eleven-year old boys do best: procrastinating doing the chores his mother had assigned him.

Being the middle child of five, it seemed to him that he always wound up with the least desirable chores on the property his father farmed on the outskirts of the Sandrine Forest—out on the far western edge of the provinces in the kingdom of Laummoren.

Whenever he brought this observation to the attention of either of his parents, their response was always the same: everyone had to do his or her part on the farm. What no one else realized—at least as far as he was concerned—was that his two older sisters always seemed to get away with the more “responsible” chores that never involved any heavy lifting or venturing outside when the sun was merciless or the snow was deep. Same with his two younger brothers: they always seemed to be too little to share in any of the drudgery he had to suffer.

So one sunny afternoon in mid-April, while his sisters were occupied hanging out the wash to dry, and his brothers were busy helping their mother in the kitchen (he wondered how much help they could actually be in that regard), he decided he’d had enough of his chores for the day. For him, a day like this when the azure sky was filled with a fleet of fluffy white clouds like an armada of ships, and the playful breeze rippled through his sandy-blond hair, carrying all the enticing scents of spring... Such a day promised limitless wonderment. It would be a waste to spend it lugging pails of water from the narrow stream behind their property and up the hill to the house.

So as soon as his sisters stepped out of view with their armloads of freshly washed clothes, he quietly set down both of his pails, and—his keen hazel eyes never leaving the spot his sisters had just vacated—he crossed the stream using the usual stepping stones and stole toward the forbidden forest, in spite of his parents’ warnings about wandering too far into it.

He could never understand their wariness about the forest—nor could they understand his fascination with it. As an eleven-year old boy, he of course could not begin to comprehend how the responsibilities of adulthood and raising a family had eroded away his parents’ child-like sense of wonder and adventure. Like most children, he was of the belief that he would never grow up to be like his parents.

The closer he got to the forest, the stronger the mélange of scents that came from it—the strongest of which, of course, being the tingly aroma of pine. It made him think of the Winter Solstice celebration when his mother and sisters would make decorative wreaths to hang inside the house and on the front door.

The trees quickly towered over him like menacing giants, their needly spires stabbing upward into that cerulean sky. He chuckled to himself as he imagined one of those cottony clouds snagging on one of the treetops.

As he crept beneath those trees and into the shade of the forest, he could feel the temperature drop noticeably, and a chill rippled through him. Though he was on the verge of adolescence and rapidly leaving his childhood behind, the childish part of him that stubbornly remained would not be denied all the accompanying fears of childhood. And it was that side of him that now began to wonder if there might not be some merit to his parents' warnings about the forest.

He was quick to dismiss this thought, though; as he was quick to dismiss his sisters when they tried to convince him that a witch lived deep in the forest. And it was she who soured their milk and spoiled their crops. Such stories may have worked to frighten his little brothers into an early bedtime, but he was getting too old for fairy tales.

Still...

With his family farm receding into the distance and becoming more obscured by the ranks of trees standing between him and safety, it was a little harder for him to disregard those stories now.

Pine needles and leaves crunching beneath his feet, he soon came upon an enormous tree stump—the diameter of which looked to be close to that of his family's dining room table, at least by his estimation. His jaw dropped and his mind raced as he tried to conjure up a mental image of just how big the axe must have been to fell such a tree—not to mention how big the axe's wielder must have been.

Of course, being only eleven years old and the son of a simple farmer, it was beyond his understanding that ages ago, a craft other than that of an axe-wielder had been used to fell the tree that left this stump behind. And it was that same craft that had demanded a sacrifice at the makeshift altar which had been the primary purpose of that stump in those days.

Ignorant of such things, as eleven-year old boys should be, he saw the stump instead as a miniature battlefield. He was already gathering handfuls of small stones to serve as soldiers in the battle that was about to be waged in his limitless imagination.

Some of those stone soldiers might even wind up being the legendary Archers of Laummoren.

Time slipped away from him as he marshalled his imaginary armies across the vast battlefield—the forces of good prevailing, of course, as they always do in the minds of young boys. It wasn't until those young boys became men that they would come to realize that such was not always the case when it came to wars in the real world.

Realizing he should probably head back home before his absence would be noticed, he gathered his collection of stones into a pile atop the stump, when he paused, smiling.

If there actually was a witch in this forest, he would find out.

He began arranging the stones in the shape of letters to form words—words he had learned from his oldest sister and by exploring the handful of tattered books he'd discovered in the house.

The stub of his tongue poking from the corner of his mouth (another lingering childish affectation), he spelled out two simple words on the surface of the tree stump:

HI WITCH

Then, chuckling to himself, he raced back home to resume gathering water from the stream. And fortunately for him, no one had even noticed he'd been gone for what seemed to him like hours.

Which is what gave him the confidence to visit that stump again when another opportunity presented itself a few days later.

This time, he found a way to sneak away from hauling firewood to revisit the forest. He had mostly forgotten about the giant tree stump and the message he had left using the stones until he spotted the stump again. A smile spreading across his face, he ran up to the stump, eager to conduct another imaginary battle with his stone soldiers when his smile faltered.

The stones he had arranged to read “HI WITCH” had been rearranged. They now read:

HI BOY

Gooseflesh rose on his arms, and he began peering around nervously, that childish part of him wondering if perhaps his sisters had been right all along about the witch of the forest.

He fought the impulse to turn and run back home, deciding instead to tempt fate—and potentially the wrath of a witch—by spelling out a response:

WHO R U

He knew he misspelled “are” and “you”, but opted for simplicity and convenience since he was starting to question if he should be lingering here so long.

Content with his brief note, he cut his forest visit short this time and did head back home, doubting he would even return anytime soon.

But he did. Because few forces in the world are as powerful as the curiosity of an adventurous young boy.

And it was that curiosity that compelled him back into the Sandrine Forest again a week later.

His heart thudding in his chest, his pulse thundering in his ears, he crept slowly toward the tree stump to discover more words spelled out with more stones:

I AM THE WORD WITCH

His brow raised curiously, wondering was a “Word Witch” could be.

His fears somewhat allayed, he was feeling a little more daring with his next message—deciding to test if this “Word Witch” was willing to play a word game with him. This time, he spelled out a single word, replacing one letter with a horizontal line to represent a blank space that had to be filled in:

F _ R E S T

It seemed obvious to him that the missing letter was “O” to complete the word “FOREST”, and he was curious to see if the Word Witch would be able to figure that out, too.

And as it happened, he would find out the next time he ventured back into the forest two days later.

Much to his amusement, the boy found his word “FOREST” had been completed with its missing “O”.

Even more curious to him was that someone—presumably the self-described Word Witch—had left a word puzzle for him to solve:

S T _ M P

He smiled as he filled in the blank with a “U” to form the word “STUMP”.

Then, thinking hard, he left another missing-letter puzzle in response. And when he returned the next time, his puzzle had been solved and another puzzle was left for him to solve.

And so it went for him the next few months, taking turns playing this word game with his mysterious unseen opponent, whom he playfully thought of as the Word Witch. Sometimes they would go weeks between turns, and the words became increasingly more complex, but he always found a new word puzzle awaiting him, and he always left one in return.

The game was temporarily suspended during the winter, but resumed again in the spring. And it continued this way for the next few years—the turns becoming still further apart and the words still more complicated. As he grew older, the ritual took on a greater significance for him. He no longer concerned himself as much with wondering who this Word Witch might be, but he instead took comfort and even delight in the simple pleasure this childish game offered him as he left childhood further and further behind him.

That is, until he was called to serve His Majesty in the infantry alongside the Archers of Laummoren.

It was late September in his seventeenth year, and the leaves had tarnished from their vibrant summer green to their more sedate autumn hues. Of course, the giant evergreens of the Sandrine Forest remained steadfastly verdant, as they had for decades.

No longer that carefree boy that once stole into the forest to shirk his chores, he decided to visit the familiar tree stump one more time before he would leave for His Majesty's Citadel in the morning. Though he was not skilled enough to be an Archer himself, that wouldn't keep him from fulfilling his duty to his king in repelling the latest attacks from foreign invaders. He knew little about the latest series of battles, but he knew he would honor his family and serve his king admirably with a blade if not with a bow and arrow.

Twilight had just fallen, and he lit a smoke-blackened lantern to light his well-trodden path into the forest to leave one last word puzzle before he headed off to a real battle—as opposed to the pretend wars he used to fight with the stones atop the giant tree stump he now sought.

The autumn breeze whispered in his ears, and the surrounding tree branches creaked and groaned menacingly around him as he approached the tree stump. He raised the lantern slightly to offer a wider circle of light to reveal the puzzle that had been left for him:

K _ S M _ T

He chuckled to himself at the irony of his solution to this puzzle:

KISMET

Fate. Destiny. Like that which he was about to embark upon.

He thought intently for several minutes, the velvety shadows dancing across his solemn face, then a hint of a smile appeared as he spelled out his word puzzle:

S _ R _ N D _ P _ T _

As the words played had advanced over the years, so had his vocabulary and that of the Word Witch. Still, he hoped this word wasn't too challenging for his still unseen and anonymous opponent, but he couldn't resist how appropriate the word was, all things considered. He hoped it would be at least a little easier to solve with only the vowels missing.

He hoped even more that he would make it back to see if it had been solved or not.

He did make it back home eventually, but not without a cost.

He had survived his first few skirmishes relatively unscathed. But it had been a surprise ambush on a return trip to His Majesty's Citadel right after the Winter Solstice that had cost him his right leg below the knee. While he had been spared his life, unlike many of his companions, the loss of his leg meant that his days serving his king in the infantry were at an end. He would be sent home honorably with a permanent reminder of his service to His Majesty as he figured out what use he would be to his family and his community in the coming years. He was welcomed home by his family who accommodated his disability the best they could—along with offering whatever consolation they could, considering the challenges he would now face with only one leg. He spent the remainder of that winter adjusting to his new life and offering his family whatever assistance he could.

Before not too long, the gloom of winter gave way to the promise of spring, and he was no longer content to while away his days indoors feeling sorry for himself. So he grabbed the makeshift crutch he had fashioned and perfected during the cold winter days and embarked for the Sandrine Forest. He didn't want to get his hopes up by expecting the next round of the word game he'd been playing with the Word Witch, but he figured at least the fresh air would still do him a world of good.

Crossing the narrow stream proved to be even more precarious than he'd anticipated, but he was never one to shy away from a challenge or an adventure, and he persevered without sustaining any additional injuries.

As he passed under the impossibly tall pine trees, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply of all the familiar scents, instantly transporting himself back to his carefree days of childhood before he knew the horrors of real-life battles, and the scars they leave—both physical and emotional.

His progress was slow but steady, and he was in no hurry. And before he knew it, the familiar tree stump came into view—prompting the first genuine smile he could recall since he came home from war.

A smile that widened even more upon seeing that his puzzle had been solved:

S E R E N D I P I T Y

Then his smile wilted.

There was no puzzle for him to solve.

Defeated, he turned around and sat on the stump to give his weary leg a rest and offer some relief for his right shoulder that had been bearing the burden of the crutch that now replaced his right leg.

He hung his head in a disappointment far deeper than he would have expected. He realized now that he'd been hoping for the word game to continue more than even he himself understood. It was just yet another childhood innocence lost, he supposed.

He closed his eyes and let himself savor the smells and sounds of the forest to help quiet his mind when he heard a twig snap behind him.

He whirled around, prepared to use his crutch as a weapon if necessary, but still knowing that he was at an obvious disadvantage.

His eyes widened in surprise as he discovered a woman of about his age standing on the other side of the tree stump.

She was clad in a cloak of faded blue—the color of which almost matched her eyes. The hood was lowered to reveal waves of light reddish-brown hair framing an oval face bearing a disarming smile.

He continued to stare at her in wary silence before he finally spoke. “Who are you?”

Her smile widened. “Why, I’m the Word Witch.”

He blinked at her in disbelief. “*You’re* the Word Witch?”

She nodded, still grinning.

His mind was racing, trying to figure out what to say to her next. “What are you doing here?”

She chuckled musically. “It’s my turn.”

He laughed in spite of himself. “After all this time, you decided to take this turn in person?”

She rounded the stump to close the distance between them. “I figured it was time we finally met.”

“Six years...” He noted as much to himself as to her.

“I know,” she replied. “I also figured it was time to thank you.”

“Thank me for what?” He asked.

“For playing this game with me for so long.” She fixed him with her gaze. “It really helped.”

He raised an eyebrow quizzically. “Helped?”

She gestured back behind her. “I’ve lived in a cabin deep in this forest all my life with my father, caring for him after my mother left us.”

He returned her gaze expectantly.

“When I was little, my father was wounded in battle,” she continued, gesturing to his leg. “Like you.”

“But how—” he started to ask, but she didn’t let him finish.

“He lost an arm, though,” she added. “His left one. But that wasn’t the worst of it. He let his injury eat away at his mind and his self-esteem. He thought himself useless, of no value to me or anyone else—including himself.”

He dropped his gaze, knowing that her description of her father was also an accusation leveled at him.

“So he kept us isolated in this forest. My mother couldn’t take it anymore, so she left one night while we were asleep—I have no idea what happened to her.” She paused, her eyes distant. “Secluded in a forest was a lonely way for me to grow up—but I didn’t have many options. Besides, I felt an obligation to care for my father since no one else would or could.” Her smile returned like the sun from behind a cloud, her eyes fixed on him again. “Then I saw you playing on this stump that day about six years ago as I was going to the stream for water.” She giggled. “I watched you a long time from behind a tree, too shy to approach you. Then I saw you make the words ‘HI WITCH’ before you headed back home. That’s when I decided to take a chance and respond.”

He was staring at her in amazement, a hint of a smile on his face.

“It was one thing I could look forward to—a break in my routine. Caring for my father was not easy. But I had our game to keep me going—along with a few battered books that have been in my family for generations.”

He was at a loss for words. He’d always known on some level that he was playing the word game with an opponent; he’d just never considered that his opponent might have a similar attachment to the game that he did.

Or, as it happened, perhaps even more of an attachment.

The only thing that came to mind for him to say was, “Are you still caring for your father?”

“No,” she replied, her eyes suddenly shimmering with fresh tears. “He died in February. I miss him, but he’s in a better place now.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he offered. He chose his next words very carefully. “But now that he’s gone, you’re free to leave the forest, aren’t you? Why are you still here?”

She smiled at him in silence for a few heartbeats before replying.

“I waited for you.”

He blinked at her again in disbelief. “You did? Why?” As soon as he uttered the words, he wished he’d phrased his question a little more tactfully.

She continued to smile patiently at him. “Because, like I said, it’s my turn in the game.” She searched for the right words before continuing. “And I figured you’d want to keep playing.”

He grinned awkwardly at her in return. “I do.”

She offered him a knowing smirk. “And I figured you’d need to exercise your vocabulary for your new profession.”

His brows narrowed. “What new profession?”

She turned away from him and headed back into the forest. “With a vocabulary like yours, I’m sure you’ll think of something,” she called back over her shoulder, her voice tinged with laughter.

He remained where he sat longer after she had disappeared from view, still smiling in spite of himself, and his mind racing.

And he was still wondering about what she had meant long after he’d returned home.

The next morning, he awoke before everyone else in the house, and he headed back to the forest to check the tree stump for the next turn in the word game. Something told him he wouldn’t find the Word Witch there again this time—but he also knew that he had not seen the last of her.

Crossing the stream was a little easier for him this time—practice made perfect, as his mother was wont to say. And before he realized it, he was standing over the tree stump and staring down at a new word puzzle for him to solve.

Grinning widely, he filled in the missing letters to complete the word that was also going to be his new profession.

Still beaming with the sound of morning bird song in his ears, he headed back home as quickly as his one good leg would allow. He couldn't wait to get started.