

The demon in the woods

"I love fall.", Helen sighs and takes a deep breath of the crisp air. "Colorful leaves, pumpkin spice latte, big sweaters, Halloween!", she swoons happily. Josie, a summer girl through and through only grumbles and sinks deeper into her red coat. Elaine, too, wraps her hands tighter around her waist, as if it could keep the cold from seeping into her bones. A heavy silence settles over the trio, interrupted only by the excited barks of Helen's dog. Everything seems peaceful, but Elaine isn't so sure. "Can we leave?", she asks nervously. Helen deliberately ignores her, but Elaine presses on. "Seriously, something's wrong. Also, it's getting late, dark and cold." At that, Helen rolls her eyes and mutters that Sky needs movement. Still, she lets out a high whistle which immediately sends the dog running back to her. "Good boy!", Helen croons, attaching the leash back to Sky's collar. "Great, let's go." Josie sighs, just as relieved as Elaine. While the group is walking back the path they had come from, Elaine thinks *Maybe I overreacted* and looks up at the bright, full moon. But then the atmosphere changes. The air gets freezing cold, and a cloud covers the moon. She freezes too, making her friends stumble. "Jeez, Elaine! What's the matter with you today?", Helen shouts, definitely angry now. But then there's a sound, right behind them that makes her pause. Sky. He's staring straight ahead, into the darkness, teeth bared and a deep rumbling sound erupting from his chest. Something like fear enters Helen's eyes. "What's wrong, Sky?" she bends down to pet him but suddenly the dog breaks into a sprint, running right into the heart of the woods. A horrible screech escapes Helen's throat when the leash pulls her with it. "Helen!", Josie screams. Elaine doesn't think, she only runs after her friend. Branches and cobwebs hit her face while she stumbles over roots and rocks. Farther and farther the girls run. Suddenly, Elaine trips and crashes to the ground. She howls. It echoes through the trees, throwing the horrifying sound right back at her. Panting, she scrambles to her feet. Helen's cries and the dogs' barks have stopped, as if they'd never existed in the first place. An unnatural silence fills the forest, sending shivers down Elaine's spine, but it doesn't last long. A scream. Elaine feels her heart pounding and her left ankle throbbing. Probably broken. Another scream. Her heart stops. She knows that voice better than her own. Helen. Elaine frantically searches the trees, but a heavy fog has set. Then, a crack, right behind her. A third scream rips the silence apart and this time it's her own. Finally, she manages to limp away. By the time she reaches a bench, she is a sobbing mess. Sinking down on it, she catches her breath and cries: "Josie! Helen! Sky!" Soon, her throat is raw, and her shouts become raspy. She is about to give up when she hears something. Slowly, she lifts her head. A shadow behind a tree. "Josie? Is that you?" Another branch cracks. "Helen?" The moonlight isn't enough to make out more than a shape. Tall. Not Sky then. Uncertainty fills her chest, but she can't move. Everything hurts. She swallows and cries: "Reveal yourself!" The shadow steps into the dim moonlight. Relief washes over Elaine. "Josie!" Josie doesn't speak, moving closer. She has a strange look on her face, which Elaine can't quite place since her vision is still blurry with tears. She only stands up, groaning from the effort and hugs her best friend tightly. But something's not right. Josie is cold. Ice cold. "What-", Elaine stammers and tries to break free, but Josie's grip is tight. "Let me go!", she demands. New panic rises in her throat. This isn't Josie. "No one who enters my forest without my permission gets to leave.", the demon hisses into her ear.