

Beware the Blackwood

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A young man on horseback approached the outer edges of Blackwood Forest in the early hours of dawn. His limbs appeared disproportionately long, hanging too far over the sides of his dark horse like the branches of a weeping willow.

The mare picked its way through ashy remains and wove around burnt stumps. They neared the line of trees marking the edge of Blackwood, and the young man's body became alert. He dismounted the horse, which immediately sprinted away, back the way they'd come.

He wandered to the tree line, tripping slightly as he tried to step over a burnt log, his body not fully cooperating. He entered the forest and paused. Looking up, his eyes widened and his mouth hung open. He ran to a tree, gazing up through the branches. A shadow cast over him, but his eyes didn't lose their wonder as he darted from tree to tree, bush to bush as though he was seeing the plants for the first time.

He went deeper and deeper into the forest until he could no longer see the trees of the outer edge. It didn't matter, he had no desire to turn back.

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The Burnout had marked the valley between the forest and the human village for as long as anyone could remember. Blackwood was a dangerous place, and those who went in never came out again, so the villagers set the forest on fire, hoping to burn it out of existence.

Miles of trees from one side of the valley to the other had blazed for days, the flames hotter than the midday sun in the height of summer. Black smoke had blocked the sky for multiple months, and the villagers covered their faces so they wouldn't breathe it in.

Each tree that caught was another piece of Blackwood that would never return. Nothing would grow back, even after the fire had died and the land cooled. Now it was just a barren, scorched landscape of heat and death.

The forest was forever incomplete, the valley scarred black and gray.

At least, that's what Nanna said. No one in the village had been alive when the forest was set ablaze; they only knew the stories their parents or grandparents told.

Nanna's warnings echoed in Nakita's mind as her horse picked through the Burnout. Blackwood itself was a dark line in the distance. Hopefully she wouldn't have to get any closer than she already was.

She scanned the Burnout, looking for a flash of green cloak or tanned skin. Movement out of the corner of her eye. Her long braid whipped her in the face when she turned her head sharply. Waves of heat rose from the ground, making the late afternoon shadows waver. She pulled on the reins and the golden mare came to a stop, bucking lightly.

"Rowan?" Nakita called, voice carrying in the Burnout's dead, unmoving air.

Movement again. There. A figure.

"Rowan!" She kicked the horse into a full sprint, sending up a cloud of ash and dust in their wake.

A smile spread across Nakita's face. She did it; she found her brother! She'd take him home and Nanna would scold him with a thwack of her wooden spoon. Then she'd use the same spoon to serve them dinner and everything would go back to normal.

She kept her eyes on the figure, but it didn't appear to be getting any closer. Was he running away? She was on a horse and Rowan appeared to be on foot. No matter how much he liked to boast, he couldn't outrun a horse.

Nakita pulled her horse to a stop again and squinted. The stump didn't move. And that's what it was, Nakita realized. It wasn't her brother, just the burned remains of what was once a middle-aged spruce tree.

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Nakita was awake but didn't want to be. She lay in bed, waiting for the moment—
“Rowan!” There it was. “I need you to fetch water from the well, you've slept in long enough!” Nakita was used to this; Nanna often hollered at her brother in the morning. “Rowan!” Nanna called again.

Nakita turned over, grabbed her pillow, and threw it across the room in the direction of her brother's bed. A soft thunk. She must have knocked her knife from where she tucked it under her pillow. “Rowan,” she grumbled into the mattress, “Nanna's calling you.”

No reply.

“Don't make me drag you out of bed!” Nanna's voice was closer now. “Nakita, why aren't you up yet either?”

She'd been expecting that. It never took long for Nanna to switch from her brother to her. After all, she was the older sibling, if only by a few minutes.

“Come help with breakfast.” Creaking hinges announced Nanna's entrance into the room, but Nakita didn't lift her head or open her eyes. “I need you to run down to the bakers for a loaf of bread, we only—” Nanna stopped abruptly. “Where's your brother?”

Her eyes popped open. “What?” Sitting up, she saw that the bed on the far wall was empty and unmade, her blue pillow resting limply against the green, balled-up quilt. She scrambled to untangle herself from her own quilt, the blanket wrapped rather tightly around her legs.

“Blackwood,” Nanna said, her voice low with fear and shock.

Nakita was up in an instant, grabbing a blue skirt and blouse from her drawer and changing as quickly as she could. She fumbled with the strings, fingers trembling.

It wasn't uncommon for people in the village to go missing. They sometimes wandered off while working in the fields or tending to their animals. The baker's son, Jax, had disappeared fetching a sack of flour from the shed behind the shop. His father had found him in the Burnout a few hours later and brought him home.

Nakita grabbed her cloak and a simple leather belt and sheath from a peg by the door. Rowan's were gone. She turned back to her bed. Her knife stuck up from the floor, tip buried in the wooden boards. She wrapped the sheath around her waist and plucked the knife from the ground, stowing it safely in the leather.

“Just what do you think you're doing?” Nanna asked as Nakita spilled out the door and into the kitchen.

“Going after Rowan.” She grabbed the remainder of the bread loaf—it wasn't much, no wonder Nanna wanted her to stop at the baker's—a block of cheese, and some fruit and packed it in a satchel. “I'll ask Jax to work the field while I'm gone.” She turned to wrap her grandmother in a hug. “I'll bring Rowan back, I promise.” She kissed Nanna on the cheek, grabbed a canteen, and rushed out the door.

The chill of night still lingered in the air, the sun having barely risen over the eastern mountains. Their paddock and stable weren't large, just enough for their single horse. But even from the front stoop, Nakita knew Gracie wasn't there. Rowan must have taken her with him.

She ran down the road instead, feet pounding against the hard dirt. She stopped only briefly to fill her canteen with water from the pump, then ran the rest of the way into town.

How long had Rowan been in the Burnout? How far could he have made it in the night? The darkness would have slowed him down, but he was on horseback. Stars knew where he'd be.

Their house was a ten-minute walk from the village square. Nakita ran it in half the time. Her chest heaved with gasping breaths when she reached the baker's shop. The door opened—right when she was about to shove it open with her entire body—and she all but threw herself into the young man on the other side.

“Oh!” Nakita exclaimed. They tumbled to the ground, his arms wrapping around Nakita, cushioning her fall.

The man's breath rushed out of his chest in an *Oof*. He coughed a few times, turning his head away from Nakita. “I'm glad to see you, too,” Jax said.

Nakita scrambled off her friend. Under different circumstances, she would have given him a hug and asked for a “friendly discount” on bread. Now, she wanted to cry into his chest. But there wasn't enough air in her lungs, and she needed to be strong. She couldn't break in front of him.

“Nakita, are you alright?” Jax asked, standing as well and grabbing her hands. His were large, strong from kneading dough. She was extra aware of the calluses on her palms and wanted to pull away. “What happened? Did you run here?”

Nakita nodded; she hadn't caught her breath yet. “Rowan . . . Blackwood . . . took Gracie—” Curse the necessity for air to speak coherently. She could barely get a few words out between breaths.

“We'll go look for him. Come—”

“No!” Nakita interrupted, pulling him back when he stepped toward the door. “Nanna . . . Can you . . . help her in the field?”

“You need help searching,” Jax said. His eyes were full of concern, dark brows scrunched together. A little crease between them.

“I need you to make sure Nanna doesn’t do anything stupid like follow me. Keep her busy. Oh, and will you please take her a loaf of bread? I’ll be back with Rowan soon.” She turned to leave, but Jax pulled her back. His arms wrapped her in a hug. Any other day, she would sink into his embrace, but she didn’t have time for this. “I have to go.”

“Take Belle,” Jax said into her hair. “She’s tied up out back.”

“Thank you.” A horse would make her search significantly easier.

Jax kissed her forehead. “Be safe. Come back to me.”

“I will, with my brother in tow. He’ll never be allowed out of the house again. Nanna will probably install a lock on our bedroom door.” She tried to laugh, but all that escaped was a breath of air. She turned and left the shop.

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Every time someone disappeared, they were always brought back in a few hours. So why was Rowan so difficult to find?

The sun sank closer to the horizon at the mouth of the valley, illuminating the Burnout in golden light. Nakita slowly grew closer to the edge of Blackwood. She wouldn’t find Rowan before dark, so she might as well take cover in the trees.

Nakita looked around. There was nothing and no one in the Burnout. But sleeping in the open felt too exposed. The stars would be watching her. No, she would find a place to sleep in the forest. Nanna’s warnings faded into the background as Nakita drew closer to the line of trees.

It didn’t take long until the trees dominated Nakita’s line of sight, protruding into the sky and hiding the mountains beyond from sight.

In another few minutes, she entered Blackwood, staring up with a slack jaw. The sky wasn't visible from that angle, just bark and dull green needles reaching in every direction far above her head. Wispy lichen hung in patches, unmoving in the unsettlingly still air. How could they be so tall?

The golden light of sunset filtered through the border trees, casting long shadows. The light nearly disappeared altogether a little further in, though the sun still hadn't fully set. Slivers of light dodged the tree trunks, stretching as far as they could into Blackwood. But even those eventually disappeared, leaving nothing but shadows and glimpses of an ever-darkening sky in the places between treetops, where the branches thinned.

Nakita glanced around, not realizing she'd ventured so far into the forest. She turned in a circle. Where had Belle wandered off too? She vaguely remembered dismounting at the edge of the trees, but it was like trying to recall an already forgotten dream; the more she tried to remember, the more she couldn't.

It was too dark in the forest to continue walking. She struggled to see the nearest tree, there was no way she'd be able to find her brother. She found the softest patch of moss at the base of a tree and wrapped her cloak around her. She laid her head on her pack, clutched her knife in one hand, and attempted to relax her body into sleep.

Blackwood made noises at night. The trees creaked at random and their limbs cracked in the distance. Branches rustled overhead, though the air remained still. Nakita was on alert most of the night, only drifting into an uneasy sleep when the moon hung high overhead. Tears leaked from her eyes like sap and left trails down her cheeks that glistened in the filtered light of the moon.

The moon was gone, hidden in shadow. Dark figures approached the line of trees, much closer to the village. There was no Burnout—no black scar across the valley. They collected wispy lichen from the border trees and dead branches from the ground. Some carried armfuls of dried grass. They piled the materials together, spacing out the mounds along the tree line.

*Nothing. Just darkness and still air. Whispers of voices speaking words long forgotten
Then—heat. So much heat.*

Red and orange raged across the valley in a white-hot blaze, burning everything in its path. Smoke filled the sky, illuminated by the roaring flames.

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Warmth. Nakita bolted upright, hands patting her body to put out the fire. Only, there was no fire, just filtered light from the sun cresting the eastern mountains. Just a dream.

She looked around, taking in the trees and bushes as though she hadn't seen them before. She hadn't, at least, not like this. Dappled sunlight filtered through the branches above, and the bright, cheery yellow made the forest colors more vibrant where it splattered on the ground. Smaller bushes filled the spaces between trees, and green, cushiony moss blanketed roots and rocks.

The air smelled of morning dew, and a layer of water droplets covered everything, sparkling in the light.

But something felt off. The forest was too quiet. No birds welcomed the morning with song like they did outside her window at home. No breeze rustled the branches above her head. Everything was still.

Nakita's hand sank into the moss, and dead pine needles attacked her palm. She pushed herself to stand, and shook out her cloak before wrapping the fabric around herself and clasping it under her chin.

She pulled the partial loaf of bread from the cloth-wrapped bundle in her satchel, ripping off a piece to eat while she walked.

She tried to be careful, watching the ground as she hiked. The roots and rocks liked to materialize out of nowhere to trip her. Brown pine needles covered everything. They glowed in splotches of golden sun.

She pulled out her knife, holding it just in case. Though there didn't seem to be any wildlife in the forest, it gave her comfort to grip the blade's familiar, leather-wrapped handle.

Nanna had gotten Nakita and Rowan their knives from a blacksmith in another town. She'd commissioned them specially for their sixteenth birthday. Each had a single letter burned into the hilt, an "N" on Nakita's and an "R" on Rowan's. They were the only personalized possessions the siblings had.

Nakita wondered how Nanna was doing without them. She imagined her grandmother standing in the field behind the house, rake in hand, staring toward the forest. She hoped Jax was watching her, keeping her busy so she didn't have too much time to dwell on the fact that Nakita and Rowan hadn't returned after more than a day.

A *snap* penetrated the silent forest. Nakita froze, cringing. She'd stepped on a stick, and the sound of it breaking in two bounced off the tree trunks and wove between branches.

Nakita kept walking, passing a hollowed-out tree.

A sharp intake of breath, so faint she almost didn't hear it. Then, "Nakita?"

She knew that voice anywhere, having been stuck with it as a constant companion for 18 years. She turned. “Rowan!”

Her brother emerged from the tree, looking disheveled. Small twigs and pine needles stuck in his coal-black hair—from sleeping on the forest floor, presumably—and a layer of dirt coated his fingers, making a home under his nails. It was smeared across his face and up his arms as well. His knife—the partner to Nakita’s—was sheathed on his belt.

Nakita didn’t quite believe that her brother was there, and they simply stared at each other.

“Is it actually you?” Rowan asked. He seemed tense, as though bracing for a possible attack.

“Who else would it be?” Nakita shot back.

“Oh, thank the stars,” he said and ran to Nakita, engulfing her in a hug. The smell of soil and body odor stung her nose as he crushed her to his chest, but she wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed, welcoming the familiar feel of her brother’s hugs. The tension seemed to ease out of his muscles, his body relaxing into hers.

Annoyance interrupted Nakita’s moment of relief. “Rowan. Brell. What were you *thinking?*” she said, shoving her brother away.

“Why are you here?” he asked. Avoiding the question.

“Why do you think?” she countered. “I woke up and you were gone. Nanna’s probably worried herself sick.”

Rowan’s shoulders slumped.

“Well?” Nakita demanded, hands on her hips. She felt a bit like Nanna when she scolded Rowan for neglecting his work, which happened unfortunately often.

“Well’ what?”

“Why did you come here? You know the stories as well as I do. What possessed you?”

Rowan’s eyes widened, their blue tinging green in the sunlight. “Did you feel it too?” he asked.

“Feel what?”

“I . . . don’t know,” Rowan said slowly, as though he was trying desperately to remember something.

“Helpful.”

“I don’t really remember much of it! The more I try, the more it slips away.” He ran his hands through his hair, fingers getting stuck in the tangles and knots. “I just . . . felt something. It—it called to me and I had to follow it. It promised freedom.”

“Freedom?” Nakita couldn’t believe her brother. “Some mysterious . . . *feeling* . . . called to you, making you get out of bed against your will, and you call that freedom?”

“I think I need to find it—the freedom.”

“Freedom from what?” Nakita threw her hands out. What a stupid notion; they were perfectly free at home in the village.

“From life—the way it is now. The monotony of the field. Of having to make money.” His eyes were far away now, unfocused. He was looking at Nakita, but she didn’t think he actually *saw* her. He was lost in his own mind.

Rowan had always been the lazy sibling. When they were small, Nakita was the first to stand, the first to walk, and the first to speak. Rowan only did those things because Nanna made him. As they got older, he was always the first to bed and the last to wake up. He dragged his

feet when forced to do chores, and complained about them loudly. Nakita thought he'd grown out of that.

“Imagine if we didn't have to work, Nakita!”

“I'm sure that would be a paradise for you, wouldn't it?” Nakita said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Yes! Paradise! It's here—in the forest.” His eyes flashed green, and this time, Nakita wasn't sure it was just a trick of the light. He grabbed Nakita's forearm and started walking, dragging her behind him.

“Hey!” Nakita tried and failed to wrench her arm away, his grip was too strong. “Rowan, stop.”

“We're almost there. I can feel it!” Rowan spoke with his whole body, passionately sweeping his other arm out and in.

Nakita stopped walking and tugged harder, her arm finally pulling free of his hand. “There's no such thing as paradise!” She tried to keep her voice calm, but frustration leaked into her words.

“Fine, I'll go without you.” Rowan turned and started walking away.

Would he really just leave? She'd gone through the trouble of chasing after him into Blackwood—the one place they knew never to go near—and he was willing to just abandon her?

She followed her brother. “Nanna is worried.” If he wouldn't listen to reason, maybe she could appeal to his emotions instead, his love for their grandmother. “I made her stay, but I know she wanted to come with me. Jax is looking after her, but I don't think they can do all the work by themselves for another day.”

“But it wouldn’t be a whole day,” Rowan argued without turning around. “If they’ve managed this long, they can last a few more hours.”

So . . . he had a point. Still, Nakita didn’t like the thought of Nanna and Jax worrying any longer than necessary.

Rowan pushed a low-hanging branch out of the way and released it. Nakita blocked it with her hand before it could smack her in the face. The brush thickened, growing denser and more overgrown. Nakita looked up to find the sun high overhead. Morning was long gone now.

Nanna and Jax were fine. They had to be. And besides, Rowan was right, what was a few more hours? They’d make it back home, whether they turned around now or in an hour would make little difference.

The pair hiked through the woods for another hour, and Rowan kept up a steady stream on conversation. He teased her about Jax, and talked about how great this “paradise” would be. An amazing feat considering he’d never even seen it before.

Nakita stared at the ground, watching her footing, and tuned him out, a skill she’d been forced to learn when they were kids. Rowan had a habit of telling stories instead of working. He always rambled, jumping from one topic to another and back again. She never had to fully participate in the conversation, just hum in agreement or say the occasional “yeah,” or “no way.”

Rowan leapt over a stream with unnatural grace, and Nakita followed, landing with one foot in the water on the other side. She shook her foot and grumbled about wet stockings.

“Woah,” Rowan said softly. He took off at a sprint and Nakita looked up for the first time in a while.

A wall of green peaked between the wide trunks. Thick pine boughs grew directly from the ground and reached so high they disappeared into the sky. Branches grew together, needles

poking in every direction, making it look fuzzy from this distance, like the prickly hair of the neighbor's pigs. The branches were woven so tightly together that there were no gaps in the wall as far as Nakita could see. It was both pure nature and one of the most unnatural things she'd ever seen.

"Rowan!" Nakita called, running after her brother.

He stopped at the base of the wall, staring up with wide eyes. She hadn't seen that look on his face since they were kids. He pulled out his knife and started hacking at branches. The little blade had almost no effect, but he kept at it.

Nakita finally caught up and pulled out her own knife. Was Rowan right this whole time and there really was a paradise in Blackwood?

Part of her hoped it wasn't true, that way they could quickly turn around. But that part of her was becoming overpowered by curiosity. There was a small voice in her head telling her she had to know what was on the other side of the wall. She was already there, might as well satisfy the curiosity.

After a quarter hour, Rowan finally managed to break through the wall of wood and needles. It was a small hole, but that was all it took to make the surrounding branches easier to break. Soon, they had formed an opening big enough to climb through.

Rowan went first and Nakita shoved him from behind, hearing mild cursing and snapping twigs when he landed on the other side. Nakita chuckled to herself before climbing through as well.

The source of the snapping twigs was an unfortunate blueberry bush that happened to live directly below the hole they'd made. It had lost a few more limbs by the time Nakita stood on the other side. She looked around her, realizing she was in the most beautiful place she'd ever seen.

The area within the wall was so large, half the village could fit inside and there would still be room to spare. The sky above was wide, the trees inside not quite as tall. It was a completely different forest, with leafy trees Nakita had never seen before. Their trunks were thick and old, covered in moss and lichen. Their branches could have been tree trunks themselves and grew long and low, some almost reaching the ground. Wooden structures were built into the sprawling limbs, the higher ones connected by bridges of wood and vine. They appeared to be houses, with openings for windows and platforms with railings.

Wildflowers of all colors littered the ground and were even woven into the vines and branches above. The mid-day sun bathed everything in light, making the colors more vibrant. Mixed among the sprawling trees were more, smaller trees that should not have been growing in the valley. Trees with flowing branches that hung loose, gently blowing together in a nonexistent breeze. White trees with black patches marring the bark. Short trees with various colored globes hanging from the foliage.

Nakita drank it all in, frozen. She hadn't believed a place like this could exist.

"Hello!" Rowan called out. There was no reply and no movement from anything except the lightly rustling leaves.

Nakita glanced at the structures above. "I don't think anyone's here," she said.

"Sweet." Rowan ran to a tree with orange spheres, immediately reaching for one and plucking it off the branch.

"Rowan, I don't think—"

Before she could finish telling him to maybe *not* touch unknown fruit, he'd already taken a bite. Only to immediately spit it out again, juice and saliva dribbling down his chin as he spluttered. "Agh!"

Nakita ran to her brother. “Are you okay?” She grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him in the eye. The direct sun turned his eyes green again.

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s poisonous, just bitter and . . . kinda stings a bit. Weird.”

“Sometimes I worry about you,” Nakita said. She left her brother to circle the base of one of the thick, sprawling trees. It looked older than anything in the forest. It could have been older than the mountains forming the valley. Its sturdiness reminded her of Nanna.

They had to go back soon. Just as the thought entered her mind, it was shooed away by her brother’s voice.

“Nakita, these are delicious! Just don’t eat the skin.”

She stared straight up, ignoring her brother’s comment. “Do you think this place is a little . . . I don’t know . . . strange? Unnatural?”

“No, not really,” he said. “Look around, this is the most natural a place can be.”

“But what are these trees? I’ve never seen them before.” She touched the rough bark, almost expecting it to feel different from every tree she’d ever climbed as a child.

“So?” Rowan asked. “They taste delicious.” He placed the orange fruit in her hand. She had to admit, it smelled good, tangy and fresh. It dripped sticky juices all over her.

“Gross!” She turned and lobbed the fruit at her brother, hitting him in the chest and covering *him* in juice. She started to laugh, but the sound stuck in her throat. “Rowan?”

“Yeah, who else?”

“What happened to your face?”

Rowan’s eyes were all green now, irises the deep, dark green of the spruce trees beyond the wall. The whites were pale with vibrant veins—an inverted leaf. Thick, branching lines of green crept up his neck and across his cheeks.

“Huh?” He reached up to feel his face, hands patting the contours of his cheekbones and nose. “Nothing.” When he spoke, he revealed teeth the color and texture of tree bark.

Nakita screamed and retreated. Her body refused to move quickly, despite her need to get away. She breathed deeply, eyes wide and staring at her brother’s mutilated face. She fumbled at her belt for her knife only to discover it wasn’t there anymore. She must have dropped it climbing through the wall.

Rowan’s legs fused together, trousers becoming textured. Branches started to grow out of every hole of his body, and his skin darkened. He tipped his head back and a thin, dark branch erupted from his mouth.

Nakita’s back hit the tree and she pressed into it, wishing she could walk through it to get further away from whatever was happening. Her mouth hung open in a silent scream, and no matter how much she wished she could close her eyes, they refused to cooperate. It was both horrifying and mesmerizing.

Rowan’s body kept morphing. Arms became branches, fingers turned to bumpy needles. It barely resembled a human, then went further until a young, weeping cedar tree stood where he had been, round, blunt needles long and hanging limp.

Nakita couldn’t believe what she’d just witnessed. “Rowan?” she whispered, scared to speak too loudly. She approached the tree slowly, hesitantly. “Rowan?” she asked again, circling around to the other side. Maybe she’d just seen an awful vision, and her brother was simply behind this tree that happened to grow in under a minute directly in front of him.

He wasn’t there. “Ro—?”

What was the point?

She was talking to a tree. He brother was a tree now.

She took a step back, turned, and ran for the wall. Or, she tried to. Her legs wouldn't let her move. She struggled, attempting to lift her foot, but the ground below her softened and she sank into it a few inches. The scent of soil reached her nose. She looked down.

Her skin had turned pale, almost white, black splotches forming up and down her arms. The strands of her pinecone hair tinged green, starting at her scalp and working its way down her braid. Her head ached, like she'd spent all day in the field with no water.

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People threw torches onto piles of wood, grass, and moss. The dried materials caught and blazed to life, radiating light and heat. The kindling burned away quickly, but not before setting the larger logs aflame as well. The blazes reached into the sky, brushing against the lowest branches of the trees.

People ran away, a woman with lanky limbs tripped over a root, and a man with coal-black hair helped her to her feet. They ran away, back to the safety of their home in the village.

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Nakita's toes dug through the soles of her shoes and tore through, extending roots into the ground. She wanted to scream, but her mouth wouldn't open. She couldn't make any noise at all. Her arms extended above her head, fingers growing into branches, small, round cones sprouting from the tips. Her braid came unbound and formed a halo of thin branches as well, leaves and cones hanging from them.

It burned, fire flooding her veins, searing her skin and turned her bones to ash.

She ached to scream—the pain was too much—but she no longer had a mouth.

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The fire scorched everything in its path, preying on Blackwood's trees until nothing was left but charred stumps and forgotten memories.

Eventually, the rain came. Fat droplets of water falling from the sky and sizzling into steam when they plopped on the hot ground and burned remains.

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The burning inside subsided. Nakita's body had stretched and thinned, her face flat and white. A ghost of her eyes and mouth remained in the trunk as black patches in the bark.

What used to be a young woman was now a skinny alder tree. Bright green leaves and brown cones sprouted from thin branches.

The needles of the weeping cedar and alder leaves rustled in another nonexistent gust of wind, shaking the last of the siblings from their branches.

Blackwood Forest was exactly as it had been before: silent and lifeless.

END