

Every wood has a witch in it. This one hides.

At the appropriate hour she spun an enchantment about her cottage like the layers of gossamer cobweb that conceal a spider's prey. Her charm was cleverly fashioned to repel any foreign gaze.

The witch's caution is because her home is nestled among the trees not far from the clearing where the sacred labyrinth was carved so long ago. That meadow draws many visitors — some willing, some tripping dazed and blind along unseen ley lines.



“Oh Devouring Mother,” the witch cries out, “let us be alone together!” But she knows that her entreaty is made in vain, having become grudgingly accustomed to her patron's primordial

indifference. The Queen of Clay is always otherwise occupied. And Aster — the witch — realizes, though it rankles her: rites by a single devotee with no extraordinary power are insufficient to sustain the Mother, our lady of such cavernous appetite.

Once, long ago, even longer than when the labyrinth was laid into the ground, this place saw a city which boasted a gorgeous central temple on the very spot that is now soft meadow and mild maze.

The temple's exterior was covered in intricate carvings, dark wood depicting legends of the city's history. The inner sanctum was clad with blinding bright brass and inlaid patterns of electrum, that iridescent alloy of silver and gold.



This resplendent structure was dedicated to chthonic fertility goddess Elkatron, whose hunger is matched only by the grief that drives her to continually weep, weep, weep. Even today her tremendous, monstrous body is secreted far beneath the surface soil, down where rock meets smoke. Elkatron soaks the deep ground with her deluge of delirious tears.

Whatever finds its way to Elkatron is consumed. She feasts on the serpents of kings and the kings of serpents.





A part of you is cut away in the forest. It lies pathetic on the dead leaves, bleeding and convulsing. You continue forward.

The forest doesn't want you. It tries to push you away. The trees withhold their secrets. You hear the scream of a fox, then a stag. These woods are dangerous and you are injured already. A tempting target.

Soon, of course, they seize you. "It's time!" one predator declares with excitement. You *know* it's time. Time has never not been the ultimate culprit.

Now you are in a clearing, presided over by a council of owls. It is twilight and indigo cloaks your eyes. The tallest owl gestures emphatically with his long wing and releases a burst of pale feathers. You are still weak. Still bereft of what you abandoned in the woods.



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But still the autumnal sky was bright and clear, and all the horizon plain, and still there came never a gleam of the Elfin Mountains. And not from this did he learn that Elfland had ebbed. But when he saw on that desolate shingly plain, untorn by the north-west wind but blooming fair in the Autumn, a may tree that he remembered a long while since, all white with blossom that once rejoiced a Spring day far in his childhood, then he knew that Elfland had been there and must have receded, although he knew not how far. For it is true, and Alveric knew, that just as the glamour that brightens much of our lives, especially in early years, comes from rumours that reach us from Elfland by various messengers (on whom be blessings and peace), so there returns from our fields to Elfland again, to become a part of its mystery, all manner of little memories that we have lost and little devoted toys that were treasured once. And this is part of the law of ebb and flow that science may trace in all things; thus light grew the forest of coal, and the coal gives back light; thus rivers fill the sea, and the sea sends back to the rivers; thus all things give that receive; even Death.

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He felt then the magnitude of the gulf that divided him from her, and knew it to be vast and dark and strong, like the gulfs that set apart our times from a bygone day, or that stand between daily life and the things of dream, or between folk tilling the Earth and the heroes of song, or between those living yet and those they mourn.

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The King of Elfland's Daughter by Lord Dunsany

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