

Death of a Monster, a short story

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Warm wind rises at owl light, rattling the leaves of the tall Eucalyptus trees standing guard along the crest of the distant hill. Below the treeline, a girl waits in the dark, moist forest crouched in the earth's depression, a vale of old growth that has protected this place for centuries. The girl is collapsed in grief. She knows she cannot wait much longer, the lament of the creature so piteous. Every night of her vigil the howls had grown softer, an agony of loneliness and hunger.

The girl feels rage rise within her: *Does no one else care? Does no one else hear?* Her rage dissolves into despair, then reignites, and she wonders if this is what the animal feels, sliding towards death then discovering one last reason to fight for its life.

She longs to run to him, to bring him a honey cake according to the ancient ways, but it is not yet dark enough, the night not deep enough—and her feet still bear the fresh scars of moon acid. One more day until the sliver of light high, high above is swallowed in an immense black sky. She must wait. Yet, by then, would Cerberus be able to accept the offering, have the strength to eat? Or could the agony only be healed by death?

The howls of the hound penetrate the girl's flesh, tremble in her bones, and swell her heart with the tears she knows she must choke down yet again lest someone hear. Oh yes. Someone might notice human tears, though most would cringe at her grief before skittering away in fear. A few others might draw close, recognizing the sorrow of their own kind. No one hears him. Her solitary vigil is sufficient proof of the deaf, dis-eased world that no longer recognizes Cerberus and, more ominously, the domain he guards. Still, she never ceased to wonder how anyone could ignore the desperate, mournful keening of a fellow creature.

The night before, when it was two days until moon dark, the girl nearly darted from the trees and crossed to the mouth of the cave. A few hundred yards of open ground, no more, but beyond the protection of the forest the dim moonlight kindled the fallen leaves underfoot, a silver like acid on the flesh of her feet, feet still scorched from a reckless, painful attempt to reach the opening before it was time. She knew the signs. She must wait until the three days of moon dark, but oh, his mournful cries, fading.

The right moment. It was always, and ever had been, about the right moment for those who still respected the rhythms of time and night and the treasures to be discovered in the vaults below.

Another night. One more night. *Please*, she prays to the creature. *Please live one more night.*

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Beyond the silvered opening in the earth, down and down the rocky path, barring the gate to the underworld, the monster lies on his side, ribs heaving in a jagged rhythm. His paws flick. A memory of running, the floppy length of his stride, the feet too large for his adolescent legs. Yet the freedom, the joy. Now only a dream of another time, long past, when he was healthy, young, well-nourished, when some of them brought honey-cakes. The paws flick again. Once, twice. The running stops.

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Hekate leaves the forest for the first time in 1,956 dark moons, followed by her pack of baying hounds who pace alongside their mistress in utter silence. She partitions the pack, chooses three to join her, asks the rest of their kin to return. Soon they are lost in the gnarled trunks. The pack makes no sound as it glides past the sleeping girl curled at the base of a large tree, a nest of roots her bed, as they have glided past the girl night after night.

One of the hounds pauses, dips his head to the girl's feet, notices the blood. He knows the terrible pain of moon acid on human flesh, understands her sacrifice. His tongue darts out, licks the skin without waking her, a healing. In the morning she will be without pain.

As the pack melts into the forest, they smell the sap flowing like turgid blood through old veins, not rising but descending through the flesh of the tree trunks into the roots, past the soft humus, past the layer of clay, and into the black black earth.

Hekate knows what she will find. She has found it before when the petty tyrants inflated with self-importance thought anything old and dark and silent and animal were worthless. But here, in this place, listening to the Eucalyptus leaves clatter in the wind, her hope had surged. It was moments ago, 50 years perhaps, when she saw two men, the Warrior and the Piscean, begin to imagine what they might build. The old woman had watched them walk the land with reverence, following its contours and sensing its depths. Neither man could foresee the terrible struggle ahead, the dreams their creation would nourish as well as the abuse it would attract. In the excitement of the birth they did not imagine its death. After all, once the seedlings have flown on the wind, what purpose the husk? But she could have warned them.

The old woman and her three hounds move past the entrance, noticing how narrow it has grown. Down, down they go, into his realm. And hers, of course, as it always has been; life with the dead endlessly soothing. She knows what she will find, has found before in other places, at other times. The memory and the foreknowledge breaks her heart all over again but her face remains unreadable, a small sacrifice until she can spend a private moment with the one they imagine a monster.

She will be able to preserve the mask of calm serenity—her signature face in every story they know—until the moment she cradles his large square head in her lap, yet again, pressing her fingers gently against the still-warm fur, lowering her nostrils to his, a soft inhale, willing him to sense her, scent her, their souls mingling. Then the old woman's serene mask will break apart under the weight of rage and grief just as it has done at other times, in other places. When they forgot.

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Hekate arrives at the place, kneels down by his emaciated form, runs her hands along the jutting pelvic bones, the cage of ribs, and gently massages the jowls that droop to the hard-packed earth. She notices that once again, just as when he was a puppy, his soft paws are too large for his body. Gently, oh so gently, she lifts his beautiful square head into her soft lap. Watching. Waiting.

This time, no breath passes between them. Even her hounds are still, standing at attention, honoring their kin. The only movement in the cavernous vault are Hekate's tears, sliding down her seamed face, dripping off her chin, a final blessing on a unique creature, her beloved.

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An unfortunate death, to the petty tyrants; after all, only an animal, possibly a monster. A slight matter of neglect. Soon, they will forget the creature, forget the underworld he guarded, forget even the entrance. They will speed through their bright lives, frantic to forget what their flesh remembers because the vaults below, and its creatures, cannot be so easily forgotten.

Neglect. The one thing the gods cannot abide.