



Hide and Seek

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It has been three days since we left home.

I was playing with my friends when some boys from the other side of the village came and started hitting us with bamboo sticks. They were hurling swear words and telling us repeatedly that *we needed to get hell out of here*.

We did not understand what they were saying. They were much older than us anyway. But while I was trying to make my escape, one boy grabbed me by the shoulder. He looked at me with blazing eyes, as his lips curled to utter the words, "You should not exist." Then he let go of me.

I ran to mother. I knew those boys were lying. *They had to be lying*. I knew mother would tell them off at once. My mother was like that – silent as the night, yet if someone laid a finger on me, she would unleash her wrath on them like no other.

She was by the pond washing dishes before I went off to play. But she wasn't there when I went back. Instead, there was a vicious looking creature that was wrapped in my mother's clothes and smelled of burnt flesh. I shrieked in

horror when it began calling out my name. I knew at once what that creature was.

Mother had warned me about witches. "These creatures disguise themselves as mothers and take the children to their caves where they cook them for dinner," mother had said. Even so, I wasn't prepared for what was in front me.

Not being able to find mother anywhere, I sped off to tell my brother and told him what I had seen. Brother didn't wait for me to finish, neither did he look for mother. He picked me up and darted straight towards the forest. I could hear a lot of commotion echoing from the other houses as we ran. I saw smoke rising out of some of the houses. There were some men in green who seemed to be searching for us. I wanted to know what was going on, but brother sprinted on with his lips sealed.

Once we got deeper into the forest, brother explained the game to me. We were playing hide and seek with the men in green. It didn't make much sense to me because those men seemed to be too old for games. But brother looked very serious, and I didn't want to upset him.

We stayed in the forest for a long time,

tackling mosquitoes and other bugs as best as we could. My skin was swollen all over, as was brother's. I was expecting him to say something, but he seemed deep in thought. I kept pulling his shirt and asking him what was going on over and over again. I wanted this game to be over. It wasn't fun anymore. I never liked hide and seek much anyway. It was too scary, especially in the dark. I wanted to go back home. It was way past dinner time.

After a while, brother stood up and pulled me back to my feet. He said we had to keep moving, or the men in green would show up and the game would be over. I stood stubbornly, demanding to end the game. He said if we lost the game, mother would be very disappointed and wouldn't give me the special box of sweets that she'd saved for me.

So we moved on.

When we reached the bank of the river, I noticed another group of people. They were all hurrying to get on a boat. Brother called out to them and we got on. I was hungry and tired and I kept complaining to brother, so one old man on the boat offered me his food. Afterwards, I was too weak to keep my eyes open. It was hard to

sleep though, because the people on our boat were moaning and crying the whole time.

This place, where we are now, is getting more crowded with every passing hour. So many people from my village have come here. I ask brother why they're here, and more importantly, *why we're here*. I tell him that I don't understand this game. He says we're here temporarily. He says our village has been attacked. And it's not safe for us to be there. So we have to stay here until things get better. When I ask about mother, he says mother is fine and she is taking the next boat to this place. *Is she bringing the box of sweets for me?* I ask. *When will the next boat arrive?* No answer.

The sun is over our heads now. I'm hearing a lot of talk about burning houses and lost family members. There are some strange people with big cameras here. They're asking us why we're here. I hear reasons that sound very different from what my brother had told me. I overhear debates on whether or not we should be here.

All I know is that I am starving and I am thirsty. And I would very much like a sip of water.