

The Witch of Snakes
Taylor Huston-Allen

In the small town of Bridgedale, darkness settled over the sky. The animals returned to their burrows, and the town's inhabitants all entered their homes, snuggling by the fire after a long and freezing day. All except one.

The person in question was a young man named Matthew Johnson, who was sorely regretting coming into the woods on a cold winter's night. Not that he had much of a choice in the matter. It was only once a month you could summon Her, and Matthew knew he didn't have enough time to wait until spring.

Drawing his cloak closer around him, Matthew slowly made his way to the center of the clearing. When he reached the middle, he looked up at the night sky. He wanted to ingrain every detail into his memory, for he wasn't sure if this would be his last.

With extreme caution, Matthew took out the bag he had stolen from a local farmer and emptied it out onto the ground. The dead mice that fell out smelled like rotten flesh and caused Matthew to gag. He hated the smell of death, the smell that could soon haunt his house if She didn't come and help him. Matthew hoped that the offering was enough to get Her attention.

Matthew felt the air somehow get more frigid as he threw the bag into the nearby bushes. He knew he had caught Her interest with the mice. Closing his eyes, trying to rid his voice of the shakiness he knew it possessed, Matthew repeated the incantation he found carved onto an old tree trunk.

“On this cold, dead night,
While the moon shines bright,
I ask for an exchange,
A truth for both of us to obtain,
Trivial or imperative, you chose the stakes
For now I summon you, Witch of Snakes.”

All sound in the forest ceased. Matthew opened his eyes, a growing sense of dread filling him at what he had just done.

“You know, I never really liked the name Witch of Snakes.”

Matthew whirled around to the source of the voice. In its place stood a young woman. She might have been described as beautiful if not for her tattered, muddy clothes and

straggly brown hair held back by a thick black rope. The witch smiled, revealing a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth.

“I always thought it was quite rude no one bothered to figure out my real name,” she said.

Unable to control his curiosity, Matthew blurted out, “Well, what is your name?”

A look of eagerness spread itself across her face. “Is that the truth you wish to know?” she asked.

Panic momentarily overtook Matthew. He couldn’t waste his one chance over something as meaningless as this girl’s name. He cursed himself and his inquisitive mind before saying, “No! I seek a different truth, one that will save my father.”

The witch's eyes lit up with interest at Matthew’s exclamation. “Save your father from what, exactly?” she asked.

Matthew gulped. He knew he couldn’t turn back now. “From an illness that will surely bring his passing,” he said quietly.

“What you pursue deals in the balance of life and death,” she giddily said, “You must have a truth of that importance to give to me in return.”

“I understand.” Matthew whispered. He already had the secret he would exchange for the answer to heal his father. He just wasn’t sure he could bring himself to say it out loud after so many months of burying and denying it.

The witch’s smile grew wider at his silent agreement. She excitedly walked up to him and grabbed his hand. Matthew was startled by the sudden contact and tried to pull away, but her grip was like iron. Once he realized she wasn’t letting go, he reluctantly calmed down. That was when he noticed the black rope in the witch’s hair was moving. No, it wasn’t a black rope. It was a snake.

Matthew stood transfixed as the snake slowly slithered its way down the witch’s arm. It was as inky black as the night sky, with bright green eyes that seemed to pry into his mind. The snake stopped right when it reached Matthews wrist, opening its mouth to reveal long, knife-like fangs, and sunk its teeth into his tender flesh.

Matthew knew he should be screaming, trying to tear his hand away from the snake.

Instead, when the fangs broke into his skin, a warmth spread throughout his body. When the strange feeling reached his head, he suddenly knew how to heal his father. All he needed to do was boil the purple flowers by Mr. Alexander's farm with dried wheat and have his dad eat it. The answer was so obvious he didn't know how he couldn't see it before.

Matthews face broke out into a grin of pure happiness. He tried to run back to the town to make the antidote for his father, but something was holding back. That was when he remembered the witch and the unspoken promise he made, and all his joy was washed away, swiftly replaced with terror at what he would have to confess.

"Not so fast, little one," she said, a look of malicious hunger on her face. "Now, I want my truth."