

## Rabbit-Footed

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Waiting in the hollows, beneath the creek, lies a nettle-stung boy. Dew slides across his brown-freckled cheeks as the winter morning sun melts the frosted glade. A white moth drifts through the air. The reeds hush, hush above his head, and one bright black eye cracks open. The air smells of cold and mud. A bottlebee drones past. The boy is dressed in nothing but a white slip, chiffon and lace and dirt. He stretches, arms up, face scrunched. The morning air tastes like wattle.

The threat of afternoon thunder hangs in the air. The boy can smell it. He is awake and the day has only just begun, ripe with the hum of happenings. He crawls from his burrow beneath the weeds and stands, itching at the nettle bites on his legs. He wants to play. He bunches his dark hair at the nape, ties it with a string. Today will be good.

The water is cold, and the boy's feet turn blue as he splashes in the creek. He scoops handfuls of water, watches them trickle and glimmer. The fish dart by his feet, gold, silver, green. He is cold and smiling. The creek babbles, and he joins it in conversation.

"Yes," he says, "yes, yes, yes, *I agree.*"

Behind him, the trees cower. A red shadow crouches between them.

The boy reaches down, holds a fish in his hands. It thrashes and flips. He lets it go. The boy sighs, straightens up.

*I wish I wasn't so bored*, he thinks.

The trees behind him rustle. The shadow creeps closer.

The boy wades a little further in. The creek laps at his knees. The hem of his dress grows heavy and translucent as water seeps. A bird swoops, its liquid trill threading through the air. Time holds still.

The boy whips around. At the edge of the water, a dog glares. Red pelt, mouth split in two. Two pink tongues hang, ropes of spit suspended and glistening. The bird calls again. The dog watches. Two pairs of jaws slide closed, yellow teeth scraping together.

The boy freezes, breath caught in his lungs. His heart throws itself around, a frightened beast. He does not blink.

The dog tenses, muscles tight on its frame. A canvas stretched taut. Two red tails drag slowly, in unison. Side to side. Its eyes gleam, three bright black pinpricks.

Hackles up and head down, it shifts. A half-step forwards.

The boy turns tail and runs. He slips on the slimy stones, slices his foot. Bloody water churns. He scrambles for the bank. The dog leaps forward, brushes his heel with its teeth. He shrieks and flees, harder, faster. He's out of the water, heart thumping, feet going faster. The clearing closes in as he sprints, breaking into bushland. He hears the huffing breath behind him, feels the ground tremble as great paws thunder down.

*Run, Rabbit. Run.*

Fear claws at the boy's skin. He cannot think. His heart is in his hands, his throat, his eyes. He knows nothing. The dog will kill him if it catches him.

It is behind him, loping easily. He feels its breath on the backs of his knees. He closes his eyes and forces his feet to go faster, twisting between the trees.

The boy's chest burns. His hands are cold and hot. He is spinning, or his head is. He risks a glance over his shoulder, even as his breath shortens.

The dog's two jaws are cracked open. Its flank ripples, glossy red fur in the morning light. Its eyes burn with hate.

Low in its throat, a growl crawls. The boy whimpers. His breath is running out, clawing up his throat. His feet tear into dew-wet earth. He cannot feel them. He does not know how long they have been running, but he must keep going.

He is faster than the dog. He loses a metre, wet noses ghosting his ankles with a snort. He gains it back, gains another, until he is far enough ahead that the beast's breath fades out of hearing.

A bee hums past. He runs into a crystal spider web, the fibres sticking to his hair and face. He runs on. He cannot stop.

He is hounded by the monster, its two tails, its three eyes. It is toying with him. It gives him space, room to breathe. It crowds him, making his heart and his feet race faster.

Several times, he hears it. A low, growling chuckle in the beast's belly. It is enjoying this. It has not broken a sweat.

The boy is choking on his panic. Froth drips from the corners of his mouth. Blood leaks from his cut foot. He is liquid, burning and flowing. He is desperate. Branches whip his arms as the trees grow tighter. He does not know where he is anymore. Tears are dripping from his face, the salt stinging cuts on his cheeks from the thorns. He aches.

He stumbles.

A split moment. He is running. He is falling. Red, red jaws looming before his eyes. Two tongues. The rot of its breath gusts over him.

Then he is up again, faster, faster. His heart is almost bursting in his throat.

*Run, Rabbit. Run. Run. Run.*

*I can't. Not for long.*

Panic bubbles. He is sick with it.

*I am going to die soon.*

The dog is on his heels, teeth snatching at the hem of his slip. His ankle twists beneath him, searing pain up his leg. He runs on.

The boy is tired. His body cannot carry him further. He stumbles again, and again. Behind him, the dog chuckles again.

The boy's legs collapse beneath him, and he tumbles to the wet dirt. The dog bays in a frenzy. It lurches towards him, teeth glaring like steel. Its paws hit his chest, two dirty prints on white chiffon. The boy stops breathing as thick terror sticks in his throat. He thrashes his fists against the dog, thick coarse fur coming away in clumps. It leaps back in surprise. It growls, then howls. The boy drags himself up.

They watch each other. The boy is trembling, skin and hair slick and sticky with sweat, blood dripping from a hundred cuts. The dog is glowering, red fur blood-bright against the brown landscape. Its two tails lash the air.

*"Are you still bored, little one?"* growls the beast. It has two voices, although neither of its mouths move.

The boy glares. Tired pants heave from his chest. *"I am not scared of you,"* he lies.

*"Then why did you run?"*

*"For fun."*

*"Shall we run some more, then?"*

*"I am too tired. I cannot."*

*"Then I have won."*

The boy shakes his head. He grasps a fallen branch, holds it towards the dog. It grins wickedly.

*"Face me today. You may even win. But know this: I will always return."*

The boy lunges, wild with adrenaline. The dog snaps at him. Too many teeth gouge at his thigh. Blood begins to well. He cries out, burying the stick deep between the dog's shoulders, and keeps pushing even as the three dark eyes roll back into its skull.

Between its hanging jaws seeps a final taunt. It leaves the boy's skin cold.

*"My name is... Fear."*