

Such a Poet
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The man's haggard face was obscured by the thick brim of his hat and the thin wisp of smoke came from under his long, untrimmed hair. He sat in a nonchalant hunch on the porch of the cabin, his big, rough hands tracing the fabric lines of his pants, worn soft by the layers of dust that nested in the fibres of the fabric.

With nothing else to do but loiter in the hot sun and listen to the repetitious monotone of a woodpecker's activities somewhere off in the woods, the man, known as Dustin Winters, lets his hand dip into the pocket of his garments, and pulls out a harmonica. He dusts the beautiful instrument off on his pants, taking great care and delicacy handling the slim metal wind instrument. Lifting it to his lips, he runs his tongue around his dry mouth to moisten it in preparation, and blows gently; it is clear the melody emitted by his breath is masterful - the man's appearance belies his skill, his weathered countenance sings of hard work and long days, but the soft strings of notes he plays fills the silence with a joyful serenade.

Winters continued playing for a few minutes, and all around him, the birds of the forest stopped singing and became quiet, listening to the alien melodies. As he played, he became aware of harmony with his own euphonious musings; someone was accompanying him. The soft vibrations of a hand across guitar strings became audible, picking along with Winter's melody, occasionally joining in more boisterously with a fleshed out chord now and then.

Intrigued, Winters struck up a more difficult and fast paced melody, and was surprised when the guitar player matched his vigorosity. Furthermore, the mysterious duet-man seemed to be coming closer. As the two men kept playing, Winters watched as the guitar player picked his way into view, emerging from the forest. They both stop playing, and behold each other in silence, Winters holding his instrument at chin level, his tired lips slightly open, the guitar player's hand resting lightly upon the strings of his.

The appearance of the guitarist stood in stark contrast to the rugged yet relaxed martiality of Dustin Winters. This new man stood upright yet at an uncomfortable angle, hunched from the heavy bags he carried on his back, yet he seemed unfazed by this, and his frosty blue eyes surveyed the scene without emotion, the edges of his mouth slumping down at the corners from visible exhaustion. His greying beard and mustache were unkempt and although his loose and ragged clothing hid his form, strong corded arms of a hazel hue protruded, clasping his guitar as if it were a newborn infant. A distinctive dark scar marred his forehead, like a third eye.

Winters perceived all this, and as he and the strange man looked at each other, Winters became unnerved by the stranger's gaze; the guitar player wasn't looking at the man, he was looking THROUGH him, as if he was not there. Uncertain as to how to proceed, Winters tentatively waved a hand in greeting to get the strange man's attention, but this seemed to have no effect. Then he called out. "You're not from around here, stranger, what brings you to our town?"

The blue eyed man's gaze snapped into place, and Winters felt himself jump internally slightly at the stranger's hawk eyed stare. The man did not answer right away, but after a moment, with seeming struggle, he opened his mouth and spoke.

"I travel alone, and I ain't looking to cause no. All I want is shelter for the night. Y'all wouldn't take offense if a man found a quiet place in your town to rest his weary bones, would ya?"

Winters considered his request, still slightly startled by the stranger's neptunian gaze, but after pondering it a minute, he decided the man spoke the truth, after all, what danger could a traveling musician pose to a town full of men, armed with the best equipment and technology of the century, sharp blades of metal and glinting barrels of pistols and shotguns. The woods were a dangerous place, and men went missing; it was deemed diligent to protect yourself, and therefore the majority of the men went armed.

"Alright then" He said. "You can stay in town." Here he gestured in two directions behind him. "Over there, is the general store, where you can pick up provisions to eat. And over there, that big building, is where you can find lodgings for the night"

The stranger followed his gaze, and nodded his thanks. He turned away from Winters, and began to walk into the town. Realizing something unsaid, Winters called after him. "What's your name, stranger?"

The blue eyed guitarist turned back to him, and even from a distance, his gaze bored into the other musician. "Call me Willis, Montrose Willis" He said. Then he turned his back again, and shuffled into the town, and out of sight. Winters returned to his seat on the porch, gazing pensively into the forest, but the sound of his instrument did not grace the forest's ears that day again.

The smell of bacon filled the air the next morning as Willis sat on a stump outside the general store. Although the many bags he carried with him were now safely stored under the bed he slept in the previous night, his guitar sat next to him on the ground while he ate. As Willis looked around him, he caught a glimpse of the forest, and stared at it, fixated, and unable to break his gaze away.

A hand touched his shoulder and he jumped visibly, whipping around with a utterance of surprise, nearly falling off the stump. It was none other than Dustin Winters however, his hands raised to show he meant no harm. Willis's eyes finally showed recognition and he breathed an audible sigh of relief as he sank back onto the stump, the remains of his breakfast scattered on the ground around him.

Winters sat down beside him on the ground and regarded Willis. "Some scare I gave you there, apologies for that." Willis nodded his acceptance at the apology, but kept his mouth shut. The man continued talking amiably, seeming not to notice. "I couldn't help but notice last night when you walked into town, that's a mighty fine guitar you got there my friend!" He reached out a hand to pick it up out of the dirt where it had fallen, but, quick as a cat, Willis's arm shot out and grasped it to him.

"Hey! I wasn't going to hurt her! I know she's all yours; but a guitar like that can't be layin in the mud all day, can it?"

Willis's grasp on his instrument slowly loosened, but his hands never left the precious guitar for another instant. After a minute he spoke. "This guitar is very special to me; I'd die before parting with her. I ain't allowing no other man, woman or child to touch it."

Winters, ever amiable and placable, did not seem to take offense to Willis's reaction. He instead sat in silence, studying Willis. He pointed at the guitar again. "She's a nice guitar for sure, but what makes her so special? If you don't mind me asking; but to me she looks like any other guitar."

Willis once again afixed Winters with his icy gaze, although no anger showed in his eyes, only passionate intensity. "This ain't any old guitar--she saved my life many times."

At this proclamation Winters could not help but chuckle slightly, after all, to his reasonable mind, it seemed preposterous what Willis claimed was true; how could an instrument of wood and strings save one's life? It wasn't a weapon, or one of the thousands of pieces of magical modern technology that made the economy boom and the world buzz with life and work. His hilarity at the statement however was quickly stifled when he beheld Willis's countenance; the man was dead serious.

A bit hesitant now, Winters paused in his words, but he felt it would be remiss to leave the next question unspoken. "Saved your life huh? How so?"

Instead of answering, Willis reached down to his pocket and fished out what appeared to be a piece of paper, worn soft and crinkled from the apparent time spent there, and handed it to Winters. Now even more curious, the man took the paper, and began to delicately unfold it.

Dark lines began to appear as the paper slowly unfolded and a shape took place, finally materializing into the form of a figure, drawn by who Winters assumed to be Willis, in the center of the paper. The figure took on a vaguely human form, of dark complexion, and gaunt habitus, and seemed to be covered with shaggy fur over its body. Winters let out an exhalation of breath as his eyes landed on the most ludicrous aspect of the figure, the menacing pair of spiked antlers that protruded from its brow, its countenance emaciated, and its lipless mouth open in a yellow-toothed grimace.

He looked up from the drawing and turned his gaze quizzically to Willis, who looked back into his face, seemingly searching for some sort of reaction. "The hell is this?" Winters asked, confused. Sure the creature was hideous, but what was the meaning of it in connection to Willis's proclamation, this was just a drawing.

From a young age, Winters' credo of logic had been hammered into him by the decisive principles of his iron-fisted parents; no nonsense, no dreams--common sense was what kept a man alive and brought him money, and so Winters had embraced these principles throughout his adulthood. The deep recesses of his core rejected the existence of this monstrous creation, and through it, all of Willis's credibility. "What is this?" he asked of the traveler, his voice reaching for the pieces of a story which in his mind did not fit together; he sought to understand.

Willis reached out his hand, gesturing for the drawing to be given back, and Winters willingly handed it over. Willis carefully regarded it for a minute solemnly, then folded it up and tucked it back into his pocket again. "I drew him last night." He said. "His name is Lestor; he follows me in the woods. He wants me. My music, the music of the guitar is the only thing that keeps him from me. He hates music. All of them can't stand the sound of music."

Winters took in this statement. Still, with answers came more questions, burgeoning in his mind and clamoring for more clear concrete answers. "They? So there are more of them, more like him?" Willis nodded. "I see them when I walk," he answered. "They follow me, and watch me, and it is only by my playing that they do not come closer." And here he held up his hands for Winters to see, and with a shock Winters perceived to be the hardened calluses of a long practiced musician, instead now took form into the raw and sore skin, worn from constant playing.

"You can never stop playing?" He asked Willis. The traveler nodded again. "Never." The only time I am safe is when I stay in towns. They won't dare venture in here to get me. This is the only rest I have. So I draw what I see." And here he gestured to the woods, visible between the cabins. Both men stared, and although nothing could be seen, the forest breathed uncertainty into their hearts.

Winters hesitated, before asking his final question. "So...these things, these people, these monsters you see...do they really exist?"

Montrose Willis stared at Dustin Winters. "Why would I draw something that isn't real?" He said, his voice low with disgust. "Reality ain't pretty, but whoever said beauty was the thing to draw was a damn fool for ignorin' the rest of the world. " He picked up his belongings and got up from the stump, walking away, leaving Winters to ponder over all he had said.

That night Willis lay in bed gazing at the wooden ceiling of the room. His mind made the dark whorls and irregularities in the wood snarl in the angry visage of Lestor, hungry and ready to attack. More monsters appeared, and in one dark angry wave, they roared at him, lunging from their two-dimensional prison. He jolted upright in bed, cold chills engulfing him, and looked around wildly, grasping for the shotgun under the bed. A loud "BANG" on the window started him, and he fell off the bed with a shout, fumbling to load the shotgun. He heard the sounds of footsteps outside and rushed to the window, gun at the ready, and thrust it open. A burst of chilled air hit him in the face, and the subsequent exhalations of his breath filled the air in front of his vision like smoke.

He stared out into the forest beyond the edge of the town gazing into the dark trees, looking for any sign of movement that would elicit a shot. He screamed in frustration, seeing nothing, and raised his gun to shoot, half hoping the monsters from his dreams would materialize, so he could end the torment. They could not hurt his body, but day and night they hunted him in his dreams, his musings, in all the wanderings of his mind they dwelt in crevices and abstract recesses of his psyche they followed him, hunting him, and it was only ever the sounds of his music that kept them there, at a distance, but never leaving. His joints ached and his fingers bled from their constant abrasion against the metal, the reverberations of the string sending shocks of pain through his very bones. But he could never stop.

Then, Willis saw him. Lestor. The being stood far off in the forest, long clawed arms resting at the creature's sides, the long hair obscuring all features blowing slightly in the cold wind. All that could be discerned of his face was his eyes, the rest hidden in shadow, and those two yellow orbs seemed to pierce through Willis's very soul. With another shout, he raised the shotgun to his shoulder and fired shots at the figure, again and again, the projectiles ejected whizzed through the air towards their target still unmoving.

Then, faster than the eye could see, Lestor raised one palm, and it was as if the air parted around him. With resounding cracks the shots hurling towards him ricocheted off and away from him, as if pushed by an invisible force, burying themselves in the wood of nearby trees, small explosions of bark erupting from their impact. The hand came down and for a moment, neither figure moved and no sound could be heard following their exchange.

Then Lestor spoke. Or more Willis heard him, and although it was not in any worldly language. The voice inserted itself into him and drilled through his body, making everything echo and his vision to shake in the countless vibrations that resounded throughout his vessel. The voice was deep, and as Willis stood there, frozen, it seemed as if the words morphed themselves into visions, and he FELT them, giving a shout of surprise as the visions materialized into a dark room, and he was transported to another place.

He lay curled in a corner of the dark house, and only the light of a single candle placed on a table slightly illuminated the huge dark figure that stood hunched over him. Willis was crouched in front of the figure, and as the veins of the arms of the figure bulged, it raised its arm, the pistol it held illuminated briefly by the candlelight.

With horror, Willis watched the arm come down, as if the judgment of god was striking him down, and then he felt a sharp pain in his forehead, and he screamed as his whole world became fire, before he blacked out.

He woke, hours later, shivering and sobbing in the forest, as the rain poured down around him, and he cradled his guitar in his arms. His forehead throbbed, and his soul was splintered, it's coracoid scattered into a million miniscule bits. His head exploded in pain again and he cried out, once again succumbing to the pain, and as he blacked out again, his mind came back into his body and out of the vision, he collapsed backwards onto the floor, dropping his gun.

He lay there for a moment, sweating and trembling from the experience, cold air from outside washing over him through the open window. Slowly, he got to his feet and went to close it. He stared once again at the forest, searching for Lestor. The figure had disappeared. Willis knew he would be back though. He always would be. He slammed the window shut and collapsed into his bed, holding his guitar close. Willis didn't sleep that night.

The next morning, he left the town early, hurrying away. He stopped at the edge of the woods, looking back at the buildings. He sighed deeply, and then reached down, and pulled the folding piece of paper out of his pocket, and opened it, revealing Lestor. He shivered, and looked around. He quickly dropped the paper on the ground, and hurriedly stepped into the forest. The silent buildings listened as the sounds of the guitar filled the misty morning air.

It was the late afternoon, and just as the thin fingers of the sun's rays began to withdraw from their tenacious penetration of the forest's deepest purlieus of its denizens taciturn enterprises. No birds sang as Willis walked, his legs weary and the very marrow of his finger bones shot with fire as with pertinacious resolve he never stopped playing his guitar. It was not by his visions of those who hunted him which drove him onwards with every step of his tired feet and every strum and pluck of his tired hands, but the knowledge that followed, although he could not see them.

As the sunset, the desperation in his mind that he must reach asylum before the night fell made his mind lucid, and he seemed to pick up his step, as well as the tempo of his music, as if to steel himself to move forward with new vigour. His breath sawed away and the cold air which he breathed smelled of nothing to him but the fetid hunger of Lestor and those unseen in the forest, following at his heels, waiting until he collapsed to strike.

He hurried on, praying that a town, any form of shelter would materialize out of the forest, looming big and safe that could harbor him for the night, but none did. The rustle of leaves behind him made him jump, and he turned around with a shout, expecting to see his worst nightmares reaching for him, yet the snap of branches and the noise of feet nearby alerted him that his follower was still nearby. Nervously, he scanned the area for Lestor, but there was no sight of his demon, so tentatively, he set down his guitar, and brought out his shotgun, pointing it nervously into the bushes. They rustled again, behind him, and he whipped around, this time shouting out.

"Who's there! Show yerself! By god I'm armed and I'll shoot!"

The bushes rustled again, and Willis prepared to shoot, fearing an animal attack, or worse, one of his demons. But to his surprise, a pair of hands grasped the branches of the foliage and as they pushed them apart, a face appeared, followed by the rest of the form of a young girl, who stared at him with frightened eyes. Her hair, once carefully braided, was now messy and her clothing, much like his own, was well worn and marred by extended time spent under the elements. She gave a cry of surprise and threw her hands up in front of her face, as if to protect herself from an oncoming shot.

Realizing she posed no threat to him, Willis lowered the gun. He studied the girl. "The hell were you doing followin' me, I coulda' blown your damn head off if I had thought you was a wolf or bear or sum!"

The girl dusted herself off from where she had fallen in surprise and regarded him indignantly. She appeared to be eleven or twelve years of age and her eyes were blue, the same blue, Willis noted, as his own. Her nose curved up in an arrogant way and her lips, pursed, opened and spoke in a way that could only be described as regal.

"I'll follow whoever I want, and it's none of your business why."

Willis thought about her statement. "You got a fair point, young missy, however, I can't have nobody follow where I go, I got business in these woods, and you'd be a sore fool not to heed my words."

The girl crossed her arms in seeming impudence. "Heed your words? Hmmpph. Well, I'D be a fool to NOT follow you; there are monsters in these woods and YOU have a gun, mister. I need protection."

Who was this girl, demanding she accompany him while his demons lurked behind every tree. Willis started to feel angry. He glanced up, just to see the last sliver of the sunset peeking just above the horizon. Who was this girl, who followed him and demanded to come with him!

"No" he said sternly. "A child like you got no place in dangerous woods like these. I ain't gonna ask again how you got her or why you was following me, just clear off and don't let me see you again."

The girl looked up into his face, searching, almost earnestly, for some form of understanding. Her expression seemed to change, and her haughty air seemed to go down slightly.

"You wanna know why I'm in these woods? I ran away okay!" She dropped her head slightly, as if to hide the flush that quickly rose on her pale cheeks, but Willis didn't seem to notice, but he did have a question.

"Run away? From who?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "My family. I ain't like the way they treated me; they beat me, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna stick around anyplace to let myself be pushed around or be told what to do or who to be in life. So I said to hell with it, and I escaped and here I am now."

She spread her arms and gestured vaguely, as if that summed things up.

Willis pondered her. It seemed a valid reason to him; he would have done the same. In a way he did, he supposed. The girl seemed genuine.

"What's your name, kid?" He asked.

"November, like the month," She replied.

"Were you named after it?" He inquired.

"My eyes are frosty, ain't thye? Frosty like the month. That's why my name is November."

"I figure that's true," Willis conceded. "We got the same eyes, you and I."

November looked up at him again, into his eyes this time, and nodded in agreement.

As he looked back, Willis had made up his mind. "Well, I guess you're right about one thing, this forest sure is full of dangerous critters just waitin to snap a little girl up like you. I don't like the idea of it, but why don't you come with me, just for the night, seeing as I have a gun handy? My name is Willis, by the way, Montrose Willis."

He held it out and the girl, her face brightening a bit, shook it, smiling visibly, even though it was dark out now. "I knew you would come around eventually."

Willis, although having given in to her companionship, wouldn't tolerate her impudence. "I said you can come with me, but I ain't said you could prattle the entire way. Now shut up, come on and let's get moving. It's cold as hell out here!" He stowed away his gun, and picked up his guitar again. When he stood up, he was surprised to see Lestor standing in a clearing, not far off. He froze, his hands instinctively reaching to play the guitar to drive his demon off.

November had started walking, but she paused and turned back when she saw Willis had not moved yet. Following his gaze, she gasped, snapping Willis out of his trance, and he turned to her. November looked at him with big eyes. "You can see them too?" She whispered, almost incredulously.

Willis felt the same question bubble up inside of himself. "Wait, hold on there kid. Are you tellin' me, you can see.....him?" and here he pointed directly at Lestor. The demon still stood there, not moving, yet the yellow eyes never wavered from their target.

The two of them looked at each other in realization. "I thought I was the only one." November admitted. "I thought I was crazy; when I told people, they called me crazy."

Willis stared at her. "They called me that too. You can see him though, why?"

"I don't know." November admitted. "When I left my family, I saw him following me. At first I was scared, but he ain't never tried to hurt me. 'Ventually I started to kinda like him, he would watch over me while I slept.:

Willis was shocked. "Watch over you? That thing is a monster!" He gestured again at Lestor. "See this" he said, holding up his guitar. "If I don't play this, he tries to attack me! How come he aint never tried to do the same to you!?"

November shrugged. "Beats me. I try not to think about him too much. Fact is, I don't think about anything much anymore. I just see things, and I look at them. And then I move on." She kicked at the ground. "This is boring. You were the one who was hasslin' me to get a move on, lets get it then."

She left the clearing. With one last look at his demon, Willis followed her.

After walking a good bit, Willis broke the silence again. "So what DO you think about?"

November pondered the question. "I think about the future." She answered after a while. "Thinking about the past makes me sad, so I ain't figure it do me no good to think about it. I think about who I want to be."

"And who is that?" Willis asked. He was intrigued by this child, who seemed so confident about being so lost in the world.

"I don't rightly know yet." she answered. "I dream of steam machines that fly, and good things to eat, and a world where I don't have to wear these damn dresses." She swore, as the edge of her dress caught on a low hawthorn branch, tearing it.

They seemed good enough dreams to Willis. Something occurred to him then, in the moment. "Well, speaking of good food, how 'bout we set down right about here for the night and have ourselves some'in to eat, huh? I got some vic'tuals in my pack right here." They had reached a nice open clearing, lit well by the moonlight through the trees.

"Alright" November agreed, and the two of them set about preparing a fire. Willis unpacked his belongings and produced a metal pan, and some sausages. In no time they had a fire going, and the sizzling sound of the food filled the air with a pleasant sound and the aroma of anticipation. Willis sat down on a fallen log and pulled out his guitar. November seemed to take interest in this, and came and sat next to him. "Can you play?"

"Course I can, and damn well." He answered. "If I didn't, then HE would have gotten me long ago. He looked around, searching the trees in the distance for the silhouette of Lestor, but the demon was nowhere to be found, surprisingly. November snapped him out of his trance again. "Well, then play me a song."

Willis jolted back into reality. "Alright then, I'll play you a song then, but stay quiet while I do" he said, stretching slightly and bringing his hands into the familiar positions upon the instrument. Then, he began to play, and sing.

*"I got a mean demon in my mind
He tells me lies
He calls me a broken bird
He telling me to end my own life*

*"My demons come when it's cold outside
They can rip your head off,*

*And fly high as a bird
They bite your face
The demons roar like a bear”*

*“Life got on my nerves, and was running me amok
They ridiculed me, and called me a lost dreamer”*

After he finished playing the last cord, the two of them sat in silence. November looked into the embers of the fire, and the flames reflected in her eyes. “It’s not a very happy song.” She remarked. “Can’t you sing anything happier, not about the demons?”

“I don’t reckon I could” Willis admitted. “I ain’t a very happy man. Them demons the only thing keeping me going.”

November then looked at him sharply, and her frosty eyes pierced his. “Sing something happier, next time.” Willis was surprised by her demand, but wasn’t against it. “Alright, but your gonna have to give me some time to right some’in, I can’t just come up with some’in on the spot like magic”

November seemed to accept this. “ I don’t care if it takes you a lil’ while, I jus’ wanna hear something happier. Thinkin’ ‘bout bad things never did me any good.”

Willis nodded his head, then started to play guitar again. As he played, their smiles lit up the small clearing more than the fire, or the moon ever could.

The following days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months as Willis and November traveled together, stopping at towns and covering hundreds of miles as they walked through the woods. They talked, and Willis taught November how to play the guitar. She was often frustrated, but quietly in his mind, Willis felt she was a natural at it. Rarely did the thought of Lestor, or the torments of his past occupy his mind, so busy was he with the cultivation of his new creation, this blossoming thing, this youth that brought new energy and vigour to his mind.

It was a strange thing, how his fixation with his demons seemed to leave him with this new distraction, and with their absence, a strange transformation began to come over Montrose Willis. No longer did his entire body sag with constant exhaustion and stress, he stood up straight and his eyes were bright. His fingers started to heal, as he no longer felt the need to constantly play, and his disheveled clothing, at the insistence of November, were discarded for new, clean ones at one of the towns they stopped in.

Yet something happened, just as the summer was coming on, and the two had been together for several months now. November had grown taller now, her hair less of a dirty blonde, and her temper had evened out a bit from when they had first met. Willis suspected that the life he led had done that. All the walking, and routines of hunting for food, making a clearing your home for the night, coaxing the delicate fingers of fire to sputter into a roaring center of heat and light every night, sleeping under the stars, and hearing the perpetual symphony of the woods inhabitants could make or break a man or woman; you had to be a certain breed to live the sort of life that Willis and November now did.

But the day came when they entered the northern town of Fort Virgil, named after its founder, Virgil Bearclaw, came down from the mountains after a lifetime of rugged living and killing bears, hence where he got his name, and built a cabin which he used as a trading post for travelers passing by. So started Fort Virgil, and although Bearclaw had been dead for many years, the town had grown and persisted, and the people there found an acceptable living. Willis had been to the town before, but it would be November's first time in it, in fact, it would be her first time in any town, for as before, he had forbidden her before out of fear she would be recognized by someone, as the fact she had run away might have led people to on the lookout for someone of a similar appearance.

But by now Willis felt this would have been forgotten about, and November's slight change in appearance, as well as her accompaniment to him, might throw anyone off her scent. They had had no problems yet. Why should they now? Willis was willing to take that risk, and November had been bothering him extra of late to let her accompany him into the town. All the same, they would have to be careful. Fort Virgil coincidentally was not far from where Willis had first met November. She would have to enter the town disguised. Willis had an extra set of men's clothes she would wear, and her long braids would be tied up under her hat. As much as November hated the idea of going disguised into the town, the allure of a new adventure never ceased her spirit to waver in her determination to go with him.

So as they stopped outside the town, November changed into Willis's clothes and put her hair up, and after deeming her a completely new person, they proceeded into the town. No one paid much attention to the man and the boy-disguised-girl, they seemed a normal enough pair to the passing through the town, and the townspeople went about their daily business with their heads down and their eyes not looking anywhere in particular.

November felt a little skip of happiness beat in her heart; maybe everything was safe. She looked up at Willis and found him looking back at her, she opened her mouth to speak but he put his hands to his lips and just nodded. Then he pointed to a tall red building on the other side of street. November looked up at it and read the sign "General Goods". She nodded; this was their plan. Willis needed to pick up some new shoes, his had worn down from the endless miles of trekking, and he also wanted to pick up a birthday present for November, unbeknownst to her. November would stay outside the store and keep a watch out while Willis shopped inside. Then they could leave without any hassle.

The two of them crossed the street and as Willis went into the store, November took up a seat on the porch of the store. There were a lot of signs posted on the windows, lots of advertisements, for alligator skin gloves or the new fanciest dress or shiniest rifle. A photo of a fat, mustachioed man wearing a top hat adorned several posters, with a statement about lower taxes; she supposed he must be a politician running for something or other.

Inside of the store, Willis had found a good sturdy pair of leather boots, just what he was looking for. Now it was time to find November a birthday present. And he had just the idea. A guitar of her own. His was too big for and besides, it was his, as much as he trusted her with it, it would never be hers. She had left her home with nothing at all but the clothes on her back, it was high time she had something of her own to treasure and love. A guitar of her own would be perfect; she would be ecstatic, Willis knew.

The store had several surprisingly, he did not expect them to carry such modern frivolities like musical instruments but they indeed did, three handsome guitars, all of various shades and sizes. He found one he liked of medium stature, a nice oaken shade, and hefted it in his arms, it was perfect. He absentmindedly strummed a chord or two, and liking the sound, sat down on a nearby chair to test it out.

Outside, November continued to occupy herself with the preoccupation of reading all the posters on the walls of the store. Many interesting people occupied the posters, ugly, dark criminals with hairy faces and heavy foreheads, and pale-faced women, stuffed into corsets and hats of exotic birds. They all seemed to look far away, with their paper eyes, and they made her feel strangely sad. But then another poster caught her eye.

A young girl was on this poster, wearing a black vest and a black hat, and her tight mouth and stoic countenance were not November's own. She looked at the name on the poster. "Ruth Coughenor" it read. "Missing child: Reward if found." And with a chill, she realized it was her name. Her real name.

She had forgotten. That name hadn't been used in a long time, since her mother had screamed it at her as she ran away into the woods. She hated that name, so she had made a new one for herself. November was her name now. Ruth Coughenor was dead, and she sure didn't belong to anyone. Yet still, as she stared at herself, she knew; she shouldn't be here. People were looking for her! The sounds of the guitar wafted out of the store, yet November scarcely heard them.

She whirled around, intending to scan the area for ANYBODY who might have been watching or noticed her. But her vision was blocked. The brim of a dark hat hid the eyes of the man, who stood in front of her, but his grizzled smile seemed to gleam in the hot sun, just as the barrel of his pistol did, pointed right at her forehead.

Although November did not know it, the man's name was Charles Anton Benoit and he had come down from north of the states, from French Canada, and continued his famed reputation of an excellent bounty hunter in this country. It was said for nights and days he never slept, hunting his prey, and for that reason his eyes glowed red, or maybe it was from the hue of the ichor that leaked from their bodies as all the life went out of their eyes and faded to black. Either way he had become aware of the stories of the strange man who traveled the forest, and the young girl who now traveled with him, yet was rarely seen, and, coupled with the posters in many towns demanding her return to her family, he had made the connection, and set his sights upon November as his next target for financial gain.

It just so happened by unfortunate luck, that Charles Benoit happened to be in Fort Virgil and was drawn to the sound of Willis playing guitar. A strange urge told him to investigate, yet the man never reached the doorframe. His target happened to be sitting right there, and so he seized the moment.

November opened her mouth to scream, but with a quickness belying his size, the man shoved her against the wall and put a hand over her mouth to stifle her. His breath stank of tobacco and beer, as he spoke. "So...you're the missing girl eh? Not missing no more I think. I'll get a pretty penny for fetching you back to your parents."

Panic rose in November's heart. She couldn't go back to her family. It would be the same thing all over again. She could see it all again; their gaunt faces cast in grimaces by the candlelight of the basement, they would never, ever, ever let her out again. She couldn't let this happen. His grimy hand was still over her mouth, so she could not scream, but she could still bite. She clamped down with all the force she could muster upon his meaty palm. Benoit shouted, swearing and releasing his hold on her, she darted to the side, but the bounty hunter raised his gun and caught her in the chest with a blow, knocking the wind out of her. She fell to the ground. He towered over her, gun raised to strike.

Then a gun shot rang out. The bounty hunter flinched, and she saw his expression change, as a red blot appeared on his white shirt. She scrambled to her feet. It was Willis! He had come to save her. He stood behind Benoit, pointing his pistol at the man, the barrel of which was smoking. Benoit wheeled to face Willis. He raised his gun again. November cried out and leapt forward, but it was too late. Shots from both guns rang out. She heard Willis cry out and saw the bounty hunter's head thrown back violently, as he fell backwards onto the porch with a crash, defeated. All around watchers gasped, but November only had eyes for Willis. He too had fallen backwards, clutching his chest. With his dying breaths, Benoit's last shot had hit him. November ran to him and heaved him up, putting his arm over her shoulder to support him while standing. Willis shouted in pain as he rose, dropped his gun. All the faces around her blurred as November ran out of the town, carrying Willis with her.

As soon as they reached the safety of their forest camp, Willis collapsed on the ground. November fell as well, scrambling to examine him. Willis was in bad shape, his shirt was soaked through with blood, and his breathing was ragged, his brow drenched with sweat. November screamed in desperation as she tried to stem the flow of blood from his wound with her hands, but they were too small to stop the deadly tide. Minute by minute, Willis's life force was spilling out between her fingers.

Growling, she ripped off a piece of her shirt to try to stem the wound better, but to her surprise, Willis pushed her hands away, his frosty eyes surprisingly clear as they looked into hers. "November, its over." He said. "You tried, but their ain't no use in trying no more; he got me good."

"No, No!" November pleaded. "I won't believe it, it is't time! You can't die!"

But Willis just stared at her with the same calm expression. "It's my time. I can feel it. I can't breathe much now. But I don't care." He smiled at her. "I did my job. I saved you."

November cried. "But you couldn't save yourself too! It's not fair! Don't leave me."

Willis shook his head slowly. "Its meant to be" he said quietly. "Maybe I ain't saved myself, but maybe I weren't never meant to. All men die. But maybe I was saved. Maybe YOU saved me."

And for the first time in months, Willis saw the slender, dark figure of Lestor, standing not far off, and he knew it was time, yet he felt not afraid. He pointed to the demon. "Look, November, He's here for me." November turned to look, and her tearstained face took on a look of acceptance; there was nothing she could do.

Lestor approached, slowly, and so different was the manner in which Willis perceived his demon, no longer did he recoil in fear from the being, and it seemed as if all around, the clearing filled with a congregation of shadowy forms and yellowed eyes, watching. The demon bent, extending its arm, and with a nod, Willis took it, with a grunt, and Lestor pulled the dying man to his feet. They joined hands, and stumbling at first, started to walk out of the clearing. Willis

turned back however, staring at November as she sat there, watching her only friend leave, to never come back. "It's not over November." He said with a small smile. "You'll see me again, I got a damn strong feelin' of it in my heart, we will meet again. But I aint fixin' to leave this earth without given you one las' thing to remind you of me. Help me, Lestor, will you."

The demon took hold of his shoulders, and, with support to steady him, Willis reached into the bag he still wore on his back, and pulled out the beautiful guitar, which he had purchased and kept safe in his bag right before the gunfight.

"This is yours, November." Montrose Willis said. "You did a hell of a lot of beautiful things with mine so....I figured I'd get you one of your own. Now go make the world more beautiful than I ever could."

He reached out his arms to present it to her, and, her tears paused for the moment, in wonder, the girl reached out, and took the instrument, cradling it in her arms. She looked up at Willis in wonder.

"Goodbye Sweet November." Montrose Willis said. "You was the best friend I ever known. Don't worry too much 'bout me, I'll be alright." He smiled at her one last time. "So long, partner."

He turned his back to her, and, with the help of Lestor, solemnly made his way out of the clearing, on his final crusade.

And then November let her tears flow openly now, as her best friend left this world, never to return.

His heart free at last, the pain in his chest numb now, Willis felt Lestor wrap around him, embracing him, and he felt his demon's presence comforting, and it brought him strength, and he was finally one with his demon. No longer would he be haunted by his past, for he had changed it for another he cared for, and Willis knew nothing could hurt November now.

All regrets and fear in his heart gone, his chin lifted, and as November watched, as he grew farther away, it almost seemed as if his limp disappeared, and his stride grew steadier, and it was almost as if she could hear him shout, and see him break into a run full of energy and life, as he disappeared from sight below the horizon, leaving this world with the setting sun.

November sat there for a while, heaving with emotion, watching the last rays of the sun brush the night sky, like faint trails of golden paint on ochre fingers. Her guitar rested in her lap, and she began to feel the urge to pick it up and play, so she did, First her fingers struggled to form rough chords, and a messy melody filled the air, seeming to choke with uncertainty, but gradually, it grew stronger, and as it did, November began to sing, in the style Willis had taught her, pouring her pain into her words.

*“Life got on my nerves, and was running me amok
They ridiculed me, and called me a lost dreamer”*

*“You such a poet, Montrose Willis
Your words would flow like honey, sweet and laid on thick
I didn’t understand you
But you ain’t never needed no education to tell me what you meant by things in life
I think understand you now though,
They say you crazy and you ain’t learned how to read
But you don’t bother me at all with your imperfect reality”*

*“You are my friend to the end
You are on my side
You are a great man on the run
And I liked you pretty swell in the madness of it all”*

*“Come on people, come on people!
Spotted horse; we are riding excitement into the mahogany sunset.”*

It was almost like she could hear Montrose Willis singing along with her, their smiles lighting up the dark clearing, the stars winking in the clear dark sky that was the curtains of their stage.

Later, the men of the towns would tell strange stories of a wandering traveler who played his guitar and left strange drawings of twisted monsters. Maybe they were true, maybe they were not. But eventually, the stories were told so often they became real, and Montrose Willis breathed again, and anyone who said he didn't would have been a damn fool for saying so.