

## THERE ARE WITCHES ON THIS PLANET

By J.G. Formato

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The colony was failing. The heirloom seeds, so carefully selected for the soil of Colleda, refused to cooperate. Initially, they were compliant—the vivid green sprouts burst through the silvery powder of the fields with unusual speed. But then they looked around and realized that there had been some terrible mistake, this wasn't Earth at all. The shock killed most of them, and the ones that were left were withered little half-plants.

Vas could relate.

And now Dad was going. He'd been called back to Base to meet with the AgTech Team, to see if they could figure out why nothing would grow on their new home planet.

"Why can't they come here?" Vas asked. "I mean, they're studying Colleda, right? They should come see it for themselves."

"With all their equipment?" Her father shook his head. "No, honey. I'll take the samples to them and we'll get it all sorted out. I won't be long, and there's more than enough provisions to last you in the meantime."

"Can I go with you?" Tiny tears clung to her lashes. Vas blinked, refusing to let them get any farther. She had made it a point never to cry when he left. She didn't when she was eight, and she certainly wasn't going to start bawling over goodbyes at sixteen.

"You know you can't. And, anyway, I need you here. Take care of your mother and sisters for me. They're not used to this kind of life." He gave her a quick hug. "Not like my Army Brat here."

"She's not my mother."

He sighed. "I know. But just be nice to her while I'm gone, okay?"

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Within minutes of the shuttle's departure, Inga dropped the doting wife act and settled back into herself. Her stepmother wasn't entirely wicked, but she wasn't a joy to be around either. "I can't believe your father deserted us on this godforsaken planet. What am I supposed to do out here? Seriously, what kind of man just ups and leaves his new wife?"

"It's kind of his job," Vas reminded her.

"I thought officers had much nicer houses," Kat, her stepsister, glanced disdainfully about the cabin.

"And more money," her equally evil twin, Dina, chimed in.

"You'll be alright." Vas knew better than to get sucked into these conversations. They never ended well. "I'm going to go feed the chickens."

The chickens didn't seem to mind Colleda too much. But then again, the chickens were stupid. As long as you threw enough grain at them, they didn't care where they were. Maybe that was the steps problem, maybe Dad wasn't throwing enough grain at them.

The plants required a little bit more. They needed nurturing, and they weren't getting it here. The sun was much farther away than Earth's, obscured and distorted by the gray swirling clouds that marbled the sky. The land itself wasn't welcoming. On the surface, the soil was beautiful—a fine, powdery dust that floated glittering in the breeze. But it was also cold, lacking the warmth and life of Earth. They'd never settled a planet this standoffish. And this time her mother wasn't there to make the alien dwelling a home. That woman could help anyone put down roots.

Vas let one tiny rogue tear slip down her cheek. Just one, just enough to ease the pressure building in her head. She gazed up into the breaking twilight, searching for the telltale glow of the Milky Way galaxy. Her eyes rested on one particularly bright star and she wished a silent wish. The star ignited, flames roaring from its center as it hurtled towards land. She stepped back, half expecting to feel the heat of this falling star.

The first star and a shooting star all rolled into one—her wish was certain to come true now.

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“Vas... Vas!” Inga’s shrill voice bounced through the house and landed squarely in her ears. Vas dropped the book she was reading and ran to meet her stepmother at the door. She wasn’t giving her time to launch into hysterics.

“What is it?”

“There. Are.” Dramatic Pause. “WITCHES on this planet.”

“What are you talking about?” Not what Vas was expecting to hear.

“I was taking a little walk to the square, trying to find some kind of social life on this pitiful little planet. I know better than to expect culture, of course, but I thought I might find some company.”

“Mm-hm.” There had to be a point somewhere.

“Well, I was talking with this lovely young soldier, such a nice man. You could tell he came from good breeding, so polite and mannerly. He said my eyes were like jewels and that he couldn’t believe a lady like myself was braving this wasteland.”

“Okay, and?” Vas cut this little monologue short before her temper flared.

“AND this horrible old woman came up to me. She was so wrinkled, and withered, and well, you know, old. And poor. She wanted me to give her some of our provisions. Said she was new to the planet and just starting out.”

“Where did she come from?” That didn’t sound right. Settlers were always very carefully chosen and well-equipped.

“Under a rock somewhere, obviously. Anyway, when I told her we didn’t have anything we could possibly share, she hissed at me. Quite literally, I can assure you. Then she made some evil sign with her fingers and waddled off.”

“What did it look like?”

“What did what look like?”

“The evil sign? What did it look like?” Vas was genuinely curious. She’d never seen an evil sign up close and personal before. It might come in handy.

“I don’t remember what it looked like, but I know what it did. Because moments later I stepped off the walk, fell, and twisted my ankle. Look!” She pulled up her trouser leg and displayed a smooth, white ankle sprouting from a pair of elegant high heels.

“Mm-hm. I see.” Vas did not see. “What do you want me to do about?”

“I want you to find the witch and make her leave.”

“How?”

“I don’t care how. Just do it Vasilisa. Your father said you would take care of us. So, take care of us.” With that, Inga grabbed the girl by her shoulders and shoved her out the front door. The locked snapped sharply, echoing in the dusky air. Vas knocked.

“Don’t come back until you’ve taken care of the witch!” came a muffled voice from inside.

“This is ridiculous,” Vas remarked to the night’s first star.

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More stars popped out as she passed the makeshift homes of the settlement. She followed the curve of the Milky Way until she reached the edge of town. She hadn’t explored beyond this point before. Broad, jagged tree trunks twisted together, barring the way. Dark leaves fluttered like feathers along the bark, and the alien forest came alive.

Just beyond the woodland curtain, Vas saw a light flickering. If a witch was going to settle anywhere on Colleda, it would be here in the haunted wood. She took a deep breath and stepped forward, ducking beneath the gnarled branches until she reached a small clearing.

In the center of the clearing, was a hut. It was built of braided sticks and straw, the likes of which she had not seen since leaving Earth. Birch trees, her mother’s favorite, had sprouted along the cobblestone walkway leading up to the door. That wasn’t the oddest thing about it, though. The hut itself was perched upon giant chicken legs that swayed slightly in the breeze. Vas froze, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

When she didn’t walk forward, the hut came to her. It wobbled and swayed on its monstrous chicken feet and then rested on the ground before her. Vas shrugged, marched up to bright red door, and knocked.

“Who is it?” A raspy voice, like snapping circuits, called out.

“It’s Vas. Vasilisa. My father is the general here, I’d like to speak with you.” The door opened and a black cat sprung into her arms. Vas hugged the creature tightly, its purrs melting her fear.

“Do come in,” the old woman said. She was wrinkled, as Inga had said. But not withered. There was nothing withered about this woman. Even her wrinkles were full of life. Vas just knew each one had a story, experience, or idea behind it. The black eyes snapped and sparkled beneath the silvered hair held neatly into place by a flame-colored babushka. She gestured to a rocker by the fire, and Vas dropped into it and the cat settled into her lap.

“I like your house,” she began awkwardly.

“Do you? I do, too. So tell me, young lady, why have you come?” The old woman turned to an enormous iron stove, the kind from ancient story books, and stoked the fire within.

“My stepmother—”

“Yes?”

“My stepmother said you were new here. That you needed provisions.” The cat purred even more loudly and rubbed its head against her chest.

“Oh. That is true. It is also true that she told me you had nothing to share.” The stove blazed.

“Don’t listen to her. She’s not in charge of anything. We have plenty to share until my dad gets back, and when he does I know he’ll take care of you.” The stove sizzled and cooed. The cat rolled in her lap and let her pet its belly.

“Is that so?” The woman busied herself with herbs from the shelf, grinding them together with a mortar and pestle. She didn’t look up.

“Yes. It is so,” Vas said.

The old woman ground her herbs in silence. Her own silence, anyway. The house was alive with sounds—the cat, the fire, the knocking chicken-bone legs. The beating of Vas’s heart.

“Who are you, though? Where do you come from?”

“Come back tomorrow, dear. Let me see if you will keep your promise. Then I will tell you.”

The next instant, she was on the cold ground outside as the hut swiveled on its bony legs and turned its back on her. She was dismissed.

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It wasn't hard to snatch food from the pantry. The Steps always slept until at least noon, when brunch magically appeared on the table. Not really magically, Vas made it, but it might as well have been magic as far as they were concerned. They had no part of any household duties.

Colleda seemed a little friendlier this morning. The heavy, clouded sky reminded her of the woolen shawl that the old woman had worn. The shimmering dust particles churned in the air like herbs in a mortar. A black cat wove between her legs, rubbing against her ankles.

"Hello, have you come to escort me back?" The cat held its head and tail high and trotted along beside her.

When she reached the clearing, the hut still had its back to her. She knocked on the back wall, but there was no answer. "I guess I need the door, huh?" she asked the cat. He meowed. "Good advice. Excuse me, House? Would you please turn around so that I may use the door? It's Vas."

The hut groaned, laboring to rise on its precarious bone limbs. It pivoted, throwing off a rush of wind, and dropped back to the ground. "Thank you," Vas said and knocked.

"Come in, little one," came the croak from behind the door.

The oven blazed even more brightly this morning than it had last night. The old woman stoked the flames and turned to the young girl.

"Are you going to cook something?" Vas asked.

The old woman looked her over, eyes resting on the supply bag that hung from her back. "I may. What have you brought me?"

"Well, I didn't know what you'd like. Your house kicked me out last night before I got a chance to ask, so I brought a little bit of everything. We don't have any eggs yet, but I think we will soon." She poured the contents of the bag out onto the table. The

old woman ran her hands over the shiny, sterile packets—dehydrated fruits, vegetables, and meats ready for easy preparation.

“There’s not very much life in this food,” she sighed.

“There’s not very much life on this planet either.” Vas sighed harder. “What’s your name anyway?” Time to change the subject.

“Most call me Baba Yaga. Now, why did you say there’s not much life on this planet either?” She changed the subject right back. Vas was surprised to discover she didn’t mind. Her mother had never let her get away with that, she’d always made her talk things out.

“This planet hates us. It’s cold and bitter and nothing grows here. The plants wither and die before they even get a chance to really grow or live. That’s why my dad had to leave, he had to go back to the Base to try and figure out how to make it work here.”

“I see. And you are left with your stepmother?”

“Yes, and she’s just like this stupid planet. All sparkles and glitter on the surface, but cold and dead inside. My mother wasn’t like that, she was real all the way through. She could make anyone grow anywhere.”

“Anyone?”

“I mean, anything.” Vas bit her lip. “Anything. Like the plants and stuff.”

“Oh, the plants and stuff.” Baba Yaga smiled. “I think I can help you with those, little one.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. They’re transplants. The poor little things are in shock. They need something to help them take root here.” Baba Yaga pulled a squat, green jar from the shelf. She pulled off the wide cork stopper and held it out to Vas. “Smell.”

“It... smells like Earth.”

“It is Earth. Soil from there, anyway. I packed it myself. Tomorrow, you and I will go to the fields and till it into the Colledian soil. It will give those transplants a little taste of home, something for them to grab onto and grow roots. You’ll see.”

“Really?”

“Yes, little one. You’re a good girl. Meet me at dawn.” The house slid her out gently this time.

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Dawn was beautiful. The clouds had thinned to a light veil that allowed the burgeoning sun to shine through and illuminate the glistening fields. The air itself was alive with the iridescence of the morning breeze. Baba Yaga and Vasilisa worked steadily, massaging the Earth's soil into the foreign grounds of Colleda. The withered brown sprouts looked hopeful for the first time, regaining some of their green as they reached skyward.

"You're safe here, my little ones." Baba Yaga whispered to them.

Vas nodded. Maybe she was right.

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As the weeks went on, it became apparent that the crops were going to be a success. The reticent transplants put down flourishing roots and made this new land their own.

Vas did the same. With the guidance of her Baba Yaga, she began to put down roots of her own. She spent her days at the strange, chicken-legged hut learning all she could about plants and people. Witch or not, Baba Yaga certainly understood the laws of nature and was eager to share with her young pupil.

When her father returned, Vas proudly showed him the crops that she had saved and the new ones she had planted. In time, she became his right hand, taking the place her mother had once filled. Her wish on that strange shooting star had come true. She was the one who could make the new land a home, not only for herself but for the other settlers.

Well, not all the settlers. She never could quite make the new land a home for the Steps— their interplanetary adventure was short-lived, and they returned to the easy comforts of Earth. To the dismay of no one.

Vas and her father lived happily ever after, in a universe full of adventures and magic.

END