

WATCH

by Jaime Formato

Appears here with the kind permission of the author.

I DON'T WANT the Watcher's Necklace. But I take it because I'm the only one left that can. The simple leather thong grips an oversized eagle's talon, a remnant of a time when the raptors were as big as dragons. It's an ancient symbol of the eyes that could watch over all.

I hate it. It's a burden and a curse.

As my mother leans forward to drop it over my head, arrow feathers tickle my chest. The sharp end is embedded in hers, blood matting the long silvery hairs that cover her strong, muscular body. I press my forehead against hers, looking within to see what happened.

She was Watching, of course. Watching over the pale, fragile humans, those little ones that could never quite figure out how to survive. There was a passel of them, picking blackberries, complaining about the thorns. No matter how many times they're pricked, they're always surprised.

One woman separated, strolling deeper into the dark woods alone. She spotted a better patch, and she'd have the most. She muttered to herself about the pies she'd make, the prizes she'd win. Eyes on the berries, she didn't notice the snake in her path and tromped over it with her big, clumsy foot. Surprised, it lunged forward and bit her ankle, releasing its venom.

Mother sprang into action, sprinting towards the woman. She knocked her to the ground and began to suck the poison from her blood.

"Ogre!" The ridiculous woman screamed. My mother reared back, surprised, and the arrow struck her chest. The bowman ran forward, gathering the woman up in his arms. As he fled, he brought a heavy boot down upon the snake, dashing its skull.

I pull my head back. It's not anything unexpected, but it kills me just the same. Mother holds my face with weakening fingers. Her eyes, brown like leaves on the forest floor, are begging me. "Keep watching," she whispers.

I shake my head. "I can't, I'm not even eighteen yet. I'm not ready."

"You'll have to get ready," her soft whisper turns to an urgent hiss. "It's our duty. Our sacred trust. And it's up to you now."

"They—"

"Please, Oni. Promise me."

"Fine. I'll watch. But I don't want to talk about them right now." From between black lips, her yellow teeth flash the briefest smile. The last smile. She kisses my forehead, then settles back onto the grass.

I bury her deep in the forest, where the humans are scared to go. I bury the snake, too.

So, I watch. That's what I promised. I'll watch them, but I will not Watch over them. And I will not intervene on their behalf.

I will not bargain with the wolves that come to take their sheep. I'll watch them enjoy their prey.

I will not beg the bees to visit their crops. Why? So they can be swatted? No, I'll watch the bees revel in the freedom of the forest, and I'll watch the humans puzzle over their failed harvests.

I will not beguile the worms to the surface. I'll guide them deeper underground and watch the humans scramble for their own bait.

I withdraw the help of my people. And I can do this because I am the only one left, the last Ogre of the Forest.

But I will watch.

I'm watching the sun flash along the river when she approaches. She crouches down by the water, awkwardly holding a spear—a spear quite obviously three sizes too big for her adolescent frame. Her fawn-colored hair falls forwards into her face, and she brushes it impatiently from her eyes.

She's ruined the view. Sighing, I heave myself to my feet and trudge towards the hills.

A shriek and splash cut the air, echoes bouncing from tree to tree like alarm bells. I tell myself not to turn around, to keep walking. But I can't help it.

The spear spins erratically on the water, caught up in the rushing currents. It careens into a bed of rocks and splinters. Light brown strands of hair float to the surface, attached to a flailing shadow. The world darkens around me, and I watch that shadow through tunnel vision. Her panic becomes my panic. My ears are filled with the sound of my pounding heart, and I can feel the water pouring into my lungs.

I sprint for the river, anticipating her position by the flow of the current. I plunge my arm into the relentless stream and grab her around the ribs. Pulling her to me, I rub her back as she coughs and spits up water. Her breath still coming in ragged bursts, she runs her smooth white hand along my rough one. The frigid water has caused the brown hairs to tighten and curl, and my cracked yellow nails are an ugly contrast to her dainty fingers.

She wrenches herself away and turns to face me. Her mouth opens, and I know what's coming. That pitiful, terrified scream of absolute nonsense. *Ogre!*

"Considering the circumstances, I would just save your breath," I snap. I want to melt into the woods and disappear, but I'm also mad. She doesn't get to make me feel like this.

"Why? So, you can murder me in silence?" she spits out through chattering teeth. She pulls her wet cloak even tighter around herself. I want to tell her that's only going to make her colder, but why should I?

"You were doing a pretty good job of murdering yourself. I should let you get back to that."

I turn from her and lope up the hill, anxious for the sanctity of my den. And then a rock hits me square between the shoulder blades. *A rock.*

"Ogre!" The little drowned rat squeaks. "You killed my mother, you ogre!" She has another rock in her hand. I don't know what she thinks she's going to do with it, she's shaking so hard she can barely hang onto it.

"I killed *your* mother?" I dash towards her, stopping just short of her face. Grabbing the back of her head, I force her forehead against mine. So I can look

within. It doesn't take long to see her mother. The last human my mother ever Watched over. I pull back, swallowing a growl.

“Your mother was bitten by a snake. A snake that she stomped on like a big clumsy oaf, never even noticing it beneath her feet. My mother was saving her, and she would have. *If she hadn't been murdered.* Blame the bowman. Not the ogre.” This time I run, not stopping until I get to the very top of the hill. But for some reason, I can't keep myself from shouting down to her one last time. “Go home and get out of those wet things and sit by the fire. You'll catch your death.”

I'm surprised to see her at the river the next morning. I actually expected a hunting party, but it's her, sitting cross-legged by the water, a basket in her lap.

“I brought you some bread.” She smiles weakly. “To say thank you. For saving me.”

“Alright.” I slide down onto the grass next to her. She breaks off a piece from the basket and hands it to me. It doesn't smell like poison, so I take a big bite. The girl flinches at the sight of my sharp teeth tearing into the bread and looks quickly away.

The river seems calmer today. We sit in silence, listening to whisper of the currents, until she finally asks, “Is it true? What you said?”

“About your mother? About my mother? Yes and yes.”

“But why? Why help her? We always hunt ogres. We have to. They kill people. They eat them!” Hysteria starts to creep in, and she clutches her basket until her knuckles turn white.

“Who's been killed? Who's been eaten?” I question her softly.

“I don't know. Just *people.*”

“Hmm...”

We sit in silence a bit longer. She stares into the water, contemplating her warped reflection.

“It's not true, is it?” she asks at last.

“No.”

“But, then, what are you?”

“We’re the Watchers. The ones that Watch over both the humans and the forest. The ones that keep things balanced and keep people safe. It was a vow made by the Ogres hundreds of years ago. A vow my mother died trying to keep.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. A tear catches the sun then slides glittering down her cheek.

“I’m sorry about your mother, too. I wish we could have saved her. It wasn’t your fault.”

“So, there are a lot of you?”

“Not anymore.” The words are acid in my throat.

“How many?”

I can’t say it out loud. I put up one hairy finger.

“I’m so sorry.” She looks like she’s ready to start full-on bawling all over me, so I change the subject.

“What were you doing with that giant spear anyway?” I ask.

“I was trying to catch some fish.” She rolls her eyes. “I know it was a stupid way to go about it, but we’re getting a little desperate. Since my mother died, it’s just my little brother and me. I have to take care of him, and things have just been so hard lately. Nothing’s really growing right, and the wolves took our last sheep last week. I can’t even dig worms to use with my fishing pole, so I thought I’d try with that spear.”

“That’s, uh, terrible,” I say, averting my eyes. She’s looking at me a bit suspiciously, and I won’t meet her gaze. “You should try digging out here.”

“Really?” She purses her lips. “Okay.” She barely scratches the surface of the earth when two fat earthworms wriggle up into her palm. She looks at me incredulously, and I smile at her. Close mouthed, of course. I think my teeth make her uncomfortable.

“You should head on home now. But maybe fish in the pond closer to the village, there’s a lot of trout in there this time of year.” *Especially now.*

“Alright. I’ll see you around, maybe.” She stops and looks me over. “What’s your name?”

“Oni. Yours?”

“Kaya.”

“Good-bye, Kaya.”

I Watch her a little bit after that. She's all alone in the world, really, and I feel a bit responsible for her now. She has a little brother, a funny little guy with a snub nose and a face full of freckles. He never stops moving, and she's always chasing after him. I'm surprised *he* hasn't tumbled into the river yet. I worry about him, he's a little too skinny.

That week, a couple of wild turkeys mosey onto their property. Kaya guides them gently into the sheep's old pen, then flies around settling them into their comfortable new home. Little brother chases the new pets around gobbling and flapping his arms. He doesn't see his sister turn towards the hill and mouth, "Thank you."

Now that the worms are back, they've begun fishing in the river almost every day. The little boy—I hear his name is Adam—has become quite the expert fisherman. He manages to catch something almost every time he casts his line. The fish just seem to jump onto his hook.

A couple of times a week, I find a basket of bread at the foot of the hill. Once, I find a blackberry pie. I couldn't eat that, but I fed it to the bears so I wouldn't hurt her feelings.

I awake to a wall of heat. The pines are withering black shadows, slowly being consumed by the ocean of flames. Thick rippling smoke, illuminated by the crackling blaze, fills the air and my nose. I jump to my feet, calling to the creatures of the forest.

Many of them have already begun the blind run. They know where they're going, as far from the forest fire as they can get. They'll worry about rebuilding their dens and nests after it has all died down. For now, they are in survival mode. I lend them what strength and speed I can, then turn my attention to the village.

The inferno is still too far to wake the sleeping villagers, but it is spreading fast. Fueled by dry grass and brittle leaves, it's only gaining in speed and ferocity. By the time it reaches them, it may be too late.

I break into a hard run until I reach Kaya's cabin. I bang on the door, calling her name. She answers, hair disheveled and blinking from sleep. Her eyes widen when she

sees me. “Oni, what are you doing here? It’s not safe for you. Quick, come inside.” She grabs my arms and tries to pull me in.

“No, Kaya. You have to go. We have to wake everyone, and you all have to move. Now. Fire’s swallowing the forest, and it will be here soon.” She turns her gaze to the horizon, which flickers and glows orange.

“You’re right,” she whispers. “Help me. Help us.”

She wakes her brother, who screams when he sees me.

“Hush, Adam. This is a friend. She’s here to help us.”

I try to smile reassuringly at him. It’s not very easy to do while trying to hide my teeth.

We run from through the village, banging on doors and windows, rousing the village. I move in the shadows, darting from house to house unseen. Once everyone is roused, I lead Kaya and her brother away, to safety.

“Follow me!” Kaya shouts, her voice strong and authoritative. I’m proud of her.

They follow me, past the river, towards the caves that only I know. The bears slide out, silently offering refuge. The villagers spend the night huddled together, comforting their children and planning with their neighbors. They’ll rebuild. They’ll make it better this time. It’s kind of sweet.

I rest just outside, Watching.

The dawn comes, and so does the rain. The villagers are doubly glad for the shelter of the cave now. The torrential downpour leaves no doubt in anyone’s mind that the fire will not survive the morning.

As the sun breaks through the clouds, they hurry back to the remains of their homes. The fire consumed the village, and they are left with little other than what they could carry last night. Again, they talk about rebuilding. And I know they will. Kaya will lead them, and I will Watch over them.

A year later, on the anniversary of the fire, baskets line the river. They’re filled with loaves of bread, cookies, and cakes. They look delicious, but I don’t understand.

“They wanted to thank you.” Kaya sneaks up on me for once.

“Really? Why?”

“I told them about you. About how you saved us that night, and how you’ve looked out for us ever since.”

“I didn’t—”

“I know you did, Oni. You brought us the logs for our cabins. Huge piles that would have taken us weeks to fell. And what about all the livestock that magically appeared in our empty pens? The wild pigs, the goats, the turkeys. And my honeybees? They work so hard for me on their combs, and not one has ever stung me.”

I shake my head, but she continues.

“The crows never come anywhere near the corn crops now, and no one’s even seen a wolf since the night of the fire. You’ve looked out for us in a thousand little ways, too many to ignore or deny. You had every reason to hate us, but instead you watched over us. We’ll never forget that.”

I hold the Watcher necklace tightly in my hand, pressing the talon into my palm to distract me from the tears filling my eyes.

“One more thing, Oni. Come with me.” She leads me towards the village, stopping short at the outskirts.

“You’ve all done a good job,” I tell her. “It looks like new.”

She smiles. “Yes, it does, doesn’t it? So we thought the town needed a strong, new name to reflect that.” She gestures to the wooden signpost, recently and beautiful carved. Grinning, I read the name of her village, *our* village: OGRETON.

I’m so happy I forget to hide my teeth. She doesn’t even flinch.