

The Deal

Author's Note: the name O'sóä' is respectfully borrowed from the language of the Seneca people; the word means "pine."

O'sóä' was a proud tree.

Every living thing that wandered her forest knew that. The great pine was a picture of radiance, impressive from the tip of her emerald needles to the sprawling web of her roots. There were others who laughed at her, old pines looking down and calling her a silly little sapling; but the tree knew she was wonderful and wanted every creature to know as well. No squirrels spiraled up her branches, no songbirds took their stage upon her arms— hardly even a fly flickered through her green array. O'sóä' kept everything away expertly, shaking them out like a western wind, until the entire forest learned the lesson she taught:

O'sóä' was not to be disturbed.

Thus, when the strange little beast came along on a murky, mucky day, proud O'sóä' was confused.

The soft thumps on her bark had gone unnoticed at first; their vibrations barely reached the heartwood. Curiosity eventually stirred her, taking her concentration from the daily task of growing as she realized what was happening.

She expected another squirrel looking for shelter; but when her lowest branch flexed toward the ground, she knew the intruder was too heavy for a rodent.

"What are *you*?" she blurted at the sight of the creature— and what a sight it was. Its pelt was barren in places; in fact, it only seemed to have dark hairs on its head and a loose, dangling patch of fur that didn't seem to belong wrapped around its middle. It had no muzzle or beak, but instead a reddened nose and little pink lips, and large ears that poked out from either side of its head. A dark cuff with jangling links encircled one of its ankles.

O'sóä' had seen something like this before: not-beasts that the old trees called Man. But Man was big. This thing was small.

Unlike the usual forest denizens, it didn't react to the sound of her voice. Instead it continued climbing, tiny eyes squinted as it quickly, clumsily reached for the next branch with muddy hands.

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Of course, that wouldn't do. O'sóä' sighed, concentrating on the branch where the Small Man stood and shaking it. The Small Man swayed, giving an odd squeak of distress, but it didn't try to clamber down. It wrapped its arms around a branch above and hugged it tightly like poison ivy.

"You listen to me," O'sóä' commanded, somehow still unheeded, as she continued to shake. "Nothing climbs me. Not anything! Get down at once!"

But the Small Man would not let go. Even as her bark scraped its skin, its only concession was a brief cry. From its arms dripped some red sap (*you fool, said the old pines once, creatures don't have sap*), but O'sóä' saw a greater loss from herself as needles, kicked by the Small Man's dangling feet, began to fall. With nothing in the tree's imagination more embarrassing and uncomfortable than bare branches, she reluctantly gave up. Her hope was that the Small Man would respect her surrender and be on its way—yet once it seemed assured her branches were still, it continued on its dutiful upward journey.

O'sóä' glared at the creature as it finally found a branch suitable for perching and sat itself down, grinning like it had claimed some great reward. But its smile shrunk as a sharp call broke out through the forest— shouts sounding like they belonged to Normal-sized Man. The Small Man cowered, both red arms clinging to O'sóä's trunk, while the pine looked out to find the source of the approaching noise. There were at least three of the Men, stern faced and carrying strange sticks, running through the brush like a wolf pack in pursuit. They carried on past O'sóä' without looking up and disappeared just as soon as they had come.

"I see," said O'sóä'. The Small Man did not want to be seen, and— just like any Small Thing— was hiding. She didn't understand *why* the Small Man was hiding (and that was *quite* frustrating), but she didn't need to tell it that.

"You must make a deal with me, Small Man. I have protected you; now, you must protect me. Not that I need protecting, mind you— I am very capable, and did just fine before you came along— but I have heard stories about Men and their axes. I kept you safe. Now you must do the same for me. Understand?"

The Small Man trembled, still pressed against her trunk, eyes squeezed shut. Suddenly, the pine felt less pride and more... *pity*.

"Is that a deal, then?" she murmured, unsure of this new feeling. "Yes. Well... I suppose you can stay a while."

For just a moment, O'sóä' could have sworn she saw the Small Man smile.