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Enter the Night
by Laura Resnick
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Science Fiction

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Young, I was so very young the night the Ixtabay called to me. The years have passed, my eyes have dimmed, my once-smooth face now bears a white and bristly beard, and the laughter of my grandchildren echoes faintly in the hollow well of my ears. But once I was young and heard her call.

The rains have come and gone many, many times since that mad moment I entered the night of the Ixtabay, but when the village is silent in sleep, when the hungry growl of the jungle cools to a soft murmur of satiation, when my heart is open to the spirit voices that rule the night -- then do I hear her again, calling to me across the void of the tens of thousands of nights that I have endured without her.

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Deep in the jungle, so deep that even today no paved road reaches it, our village perched on the banks of the river. My grandfather's tiny, unpainted house sat so close to the water that it looked like it might fling itself into the current at any moment. My mother and I lived in it with him. I remembered little of my father, who died when I was very small.

"He disappeared into the jungle one night. You see, the Ixtabay called to him," Grandfather would say to me when my mother was not listening. "And, not heeding my warnings, he went to her." Then Grandfather would sigh and shake his head.

Once or twice, though, my mother heard him, and then her dark eyes sparked with anger as she scolded him. "You must not flood the boy's ears with such superstitious nonsense," she would snap. "His father got lost in the jungle and crawled home half-alive, then died of fever three days later."

Grandfather would sigh and shrug and roll his eyes at me. As soon as her attention was diverted, he would whisper, "He followed the Ixtabay into the bush and, like all her lovers, went insane."

I didn't really know what the Ixtabay was, and it was several more years before I had even the slightest idea what a lover was. But I would listen respectfully to the old man, just as I listened respectfully to my mother when she told me to ignore his strange stories and warnings.

I had no fear of the jungle by day. I hunted and fished to help provide for our table, and when my work was done, I played with the other boys like a wild animal. The ruins of an ancient Mayan city lay buried in the forest, its crumbling walls covered by vines, its tumbled temple shaded by palm trees and swamp cypresses. We scrambled across the damp, mysterious stones, heedless of tales of ghosts, demons, and the vengeful spirits of the unbaptized dead. The British and American archaeologists who scour Central America for such ruins

did not yet know of this place, nor did anyone from our village ever consider telling them. The dead should be left in peace, my grandfather said, and the jungle should be allowed to devour her prey.

Yes, the jungle by day was a place of infinite wonders and pleasures. Emerald green and scarlet red birds flew overhead as we capered and crawled through the jungle's fragrant undergrowth. Sapote trees were abundant, with their salmon-pink fruit which makes such a sweet snack, though I preferred the yellow, jelly-like flesh found inside the leathery seed pods of the scarcer guaya tree. Orange, lime, avocado, mango, and papaya tumbled out of the green canopy over our heads, nourishing us as we chased lizards, swam naked in the streams, hid from adults amidst the tough trunks of the banana trees, and explored the ruined city of the ancient ones. In all the world, there was no better place than the jungle by day.

But at night, the jungle changed and became a place of unseen dangers and oft-told horrors. Shrill screeches and strange cries came from its depths. The friendly paths we had made by day disappeared at night as mist, shadow, and darkness obscured everything and trees reached out to embrace the unwary walker in their deadly grasp. In those days, so long ago, a small child was still carried away every so often by a night-hunting puma, and even the beautiful ocelot and tiny margay appeared ferocious after nightfall. The tasty iguana seemed like a dragon in the dark, and even the little white bats became the vampires of my nightmares as they flapped and flashed into the opaque belly of the night. The evil yellow jaw-tommygoff came out from beneath its rocks and low bushes to hunt in the dark, swinging and jumping from trees or slithering along the ground, legless and silent. More than eight feet long, it was aggressive and would usually strike more than once. I used to believe that such a creature must have killed my father, but my mother told me that its poison kills a man much more quickly than my father died.

No earthly creature, however, was as terrifying as the spirit creatures which rose through the mist after the sun had set. They conquered the manless jungle by night and made it their own, and I knew that it was their voices I heard shrieking and growling on the heavy tropical air as I lay in my cot and prayed to the Virgin and all the gods.

There was, of course, the Greasy Man, who haunted the forsaken ruined city near our village. Closer to home, there was the Ashi de Pompei who hid in abandoned hovels of burned out dwellings. If children were too noisy, these monsters stirred at night and punished them with horrible vengeance.

A far more dreadful beast, however, was the Sisimito, a huge, hairy creature which kidnapped small children in the hope of learning how to talk. The Sisimito loved fire but did not know how to make it, so he left piles of kindling everywhere believing that one might start spontaneously. If drawn to a man's fire, the Sisimito would stare at it until the embers grew cold, then eat them. Besides children, the Sisimito loved capturing women and would steal maidens and young wives who ventured away from home after dark. Luckily, my grandfather taught me how to escape from the Sisimito.

"His feet point backward," the old man explained to me. "So when you see him, just hide behind a bush very quickly. Confused, he will look around for you. When he sees his own footprints, he'll think they're yours and follow them, going back the way he came."

A healthy boy with a well-developed sense of self-preservation, I feared all these creatures. But there was nothing I feared as much as the Duendes. They were dwarves with flat, yellow faces, long arms, thick legs, and heavy shoulders, and their bodies were covered with short brown hair. Duendes had only four fingers and were jealous of anyone who had five, so my grandfather taught me to salute them with my thumb concealed in the palm of my hand.

Among their hideous deeds, Duendes were said to carry away dogs. I knew it was true, for in my twelfth year, my beloved pet Dog-Dog disappeared for a whole night. He crawled out of the jungle at dawn, barely alive and missing one leg. I knew the Duendes had torn it off when I searched the jungle south

of the village and found their pointed-heel footprints mingled with his blood.

The ancient ones knew about these creatures, too, carving their images into the stone walls of their temples and palaces. One day my three-legged dog and I uncovered strange carvings in the ruined city, and Dog-Dog barked wildly at the portraits of naked, four-fingered, pointed-heeled dwarves grinning maliciously and wearing banana fronds on their heads.

But by my seventeenth year, not even the fear of Duendes could keep me from answering the call of the Ixtabay.

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There was a girl named Chikki in the village downriver from us. I had never seen such a girl, and my soul was consumed with wonder. No girl in the world had hair so black, lashes so long, teeth so white, skin so golden. She beckoned to me with a shy, promising smile that spoke of mysteries so fantastic they blurred my vision, made my hands clumsy, and numbed my ears to my mother's questions and my grandfather's warnings.

Her family did not approve of me -- a fatherless boy from upriver, with a crazy grandfather, a three-legged dog, and no prospects to speak of -- and forbade Chikki to see me. So we met secretly amidst the whispering stones of the Mayan ruins, hiding in the shadows and listening for the approach of boys who played like wild animals. But the touch of her hand on mine, the glow in her eyes, the honeyed sound of her voice dulled my senses to all else, including the sound of footsteps; and so her eldest brother caught us one day.

Chikki's movements were watched so closely after that day that it was impossible for us to meet again. Happily, her younger sister found our predicament wildly romantic and offered to carry messages between us. Our words were brief and to the point. We would run off and get married, and then no one could keep us apart ever again. We agreed to meet in the jungle after nightfall, where there was no chance of anyone seeing us. I chose a spot very near her village so she wouldn't have to go far alone; though many young men my age had long since ceased believing in the orphans of the night, I remembered the pointed-heel footprints I had once found mingled with the blood of my three-legged dog, and I knew the tropical night guarded the secrets of another realm. I was ready to risk everything for Chikki, but I would not let her risk her safety in the lush, shrieking darkness.

I carried a torch the night I went to meet Chikki, a flaming lantern to frighten away night-hunting cats, the yellow jaw-tommygoff, and the feisty peccary. I kept to the path which, to my relief, did not disappear after dark. Without the torch, though, I'd have lost it in minutes and stumbled blindly into the reaching arms of the rustling trees, thick with vines and heavy with the scent of orchids. For the first time ever, I wondered why my father had not taken a torch with him the night he had wandered away from our village and into the forest; didn't he know he would surely get lost without one?

Ignoring the gibbering, growling, and chattering of the night, I summoned the courage of young manhood and plunged into the heart of darkness, impelled ever forward by love, excitement, and, yes, a young man's desire for his bride. The strength of my passion must have shielded me, I thought, for no Sisimito came forth to admire my flaming torch, and the bloodthirsty, yellow-faced, four-fingered Duendes stayed hidden in their lairs. Even the normal, earthy sounds of the jungle faded away as I recklessly thrust through the bush, until the night was still and only the sound of my breathing remained. And that was when I heard her song for the first time.

It was a song without words, a lullaby without beginning or end. It entered my mind slowly, stealing across my senses as twilight steals across the sky, until I realized that I had been listening to it for some time. It was a woman's voice, soft, sweet, and warm. But what woman would be in the jungle at night? Only one that I could think of.

"Chikki?" I called. She must have grown impatient waiting for me, or perhaps she was afraid of being seen at our meeting place. "Chikki? Is that you?"

The song grew stronger, as if she were calling to me. She was much

nearer now. Off the path, somewhere in the dense foliage to my right.

"Chikki?"

A woman's laughter. Light, happy, alluring. My heart started to pound.

"Chikki? Where are you?" More laughter, beckoning me. "Chikki, come out of there. You'll get lost."

The song, sweet with promise, drew me to the edge of the path and invited me into the wild unknown. Her voice rose and fell smoothly, lilting and entrancing. I had no thought of resisting as I stepped off the well-worn path and entered the night.

The jungle reached out for me, its branches enfolding me, its vines reaching up to embrace my legs. I stumbled and strayed, but the song always guided me back to her, until I could feel her all around me.

"Where are you?" I cried at last, still not seeing her.

There was laughter over my head. I looked up into the branches of a vast, leafy sapote tree. There sat the Ixtabay, combing her hair. And such hair it was! Blacker than night, it rippled like water and shone like polished obsidian. It was so long that she could sit on it, and it caught the flickering light of my torch and glittered like the night sky embedded with stars.

In her pale hand, she held a jewel-encrusted comb -- a gift from some long-ago Spanish prince? -- which she drew through the shining waves of her hair again and again in a rhythm as hypnotic as that of her song. Her skin was as pearl-white as the inside of a perfect coconut; her body was soft and shapely and graceful beyond any dream of womanhood. I gazed at her in mute adoration and fell hopelessly, helplessly in love. And the fiery gleam in her amber eyes told me she knew it.

"Beware the Ixtabay," my grandfather had said so many times in my childhood. "Beware that dainty demon!"

But he could not have known, I thought, staring thunderstruck at her loveliness. _How could he have possibly known?_ There could be no evil, no danger in such perfect beauty.

"She hypnotizes onlookers, who follow her into the bush and go insane," Grandfather always said, and I wondered why my father had been so foolhardy.

But now I knew, yes, now I understood why my father had followed her. There could be no other choice. The warm promise of her smile, the graceful poetry of her gestures, the lilting sigh of her song, and the mysterious glow in her eyes all offered a gift greater and more powerful than any lingering fear of danger.

As in legend, she descended from her tree and walked above the surface of the ground, each small, pale foot stepping lightly on the misty air as she led me deeper into the bush. So entranced was I that I let my torch drop from my hand. It fell upon the damp earth, sizzled, and died. I hesitated for only a moment, then I saw the gleaming curve of her arm in the dim moonlight as she beckoned me to follow, and I could no more resist her lure than I could will myself to stop breathing.

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They found me in the jungle, feverish, raving, and unable to account for the three days I had been missing. Upon hearing the news, Chikki became convinced that I would die without her. She defied her family and came to our village, moving into my grandfather's house to help my mother nurse me. I would have died even so, but my grandfather -- against my mother's wishes -- brought an obeah priest to the village to brew potions, chant spells, and fight against the curse which had come upon me. The priest placed gourds filled with food in the doorway to ward off sickness brought by Duendes, crossed my worn shoes in order to prevent evil spirits from entering them during my sleep, painted the indigo cross on my forehead, fed me broth made from the flesh of the wowla, and chased the fatal magic of the Ixtabay out of my soul. But though I lived, he could never chase her from my heart.

I heard the faint stirring of her song for many long, tormented nights, and I often broke my promise to resist it. Usually someone would stop me

before I could escape from our tiny house, and more than once they resorted to tying me to the bed. But once I tricked them all into thinking I was too weak to warrant a guard, and I slipped into the dark jungle before anyone could catch me. They chased me all night, their torches a banner of man in that other manless world as I crashed blindly through branches, fronds, and twining vines, searching for the love which, having welcomed me but once, would now elude me forever.

They brought me home at dawn, shaking and demented, wishing for the same peace which had ended my father's torment so long ago. How could I go on living if I was never again to know the embrace of the Ixtabay? All other pleasures in life tasted bitter after such sweetness.

In time, the hated obeah priest succeeded in dimming the Ixtabay's teasing, haunting voice, until her song was only a hollow echo in my memory. Pronounced fit in mind and body, I married Chikki and built a small house for her, well away from the forest's edge. We had children who, like the seasons, ripened and eventually bore fruit of their own. And had I never heard the voice of the Ixtabay, I would say that mine had been a happy life.

Now I am old, and my daughter tells my grandchildren to ignore my strange stories and warnings.

"You must stop filling their ears with such nonsense," she snaps at me. "Duendes, three-legged dogs, the Ashi de Pompei, and the Sisimito. Hah! These are modern times. No one believes that foolishness anymore."

Yes, these are modern times, but once in a while, a dog disappears without a trace, except for the strange footprints which mingle with his in the damp earth. And every so often, a young man returns from the jungle with a haunted soul that makes him rave until death claims him. Modern times disappear when night descends upon the forest.

And so I tell my grandsons, "Beware the Ixtabay, beware that dainty demon!" I want them to know more peace than I have known during the tens of thousands of nights that I have endured without her.

Chikki has joined the ancestors now, and I am alone when darkness falls. Now, when the village is silent in sleep, when the hungry growl of the jungle cools to a soft murmur of satiation, when my heart is open to the spirit voices that rule the night -- then do I hear the Ixtabay again, calling to me across the void of years. And I know that soon, at last, I will enter the night once more and join her forever in that other realm.

-- The End --

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