

## Laurels

By James Strong

A small town in western Massachusetts had been devoured by a great forest. What little remained of civilization were abandoned farmhouses and empty livestock fields. At the border edge of the black forest, a young man, seemingly the only person around for miles, stood. A car, half devoured by thorns, sat uselessly behind him, though he himself had been spared from the forest's attack.

This man, Lorenzo, leaned over the half-consumed garden fence, gazing into the dark forest beyond. A labyrinth of gnarled roots and thorny branches stretched out before him. From deep within the groans and screams of some human-esque horror echoed. This blight was cradled by the mountains, as if the world itself was trying to hide it. The mountain's shadow stretched over the forest, obscuring the last rays of twilight. Lorenzo's own shadow reached out into the treeline, beyond that which he sought. With a heavy sigh and a plume of smoke from his lips, he hopped over the creaky wood fence and into the darkness.

From his pocket, he produced a small, faded gold amulet and opened it. Inside were two pictures, a pair of twins. One was a boy, bright-eyed and smiling despite having been ordered not to be. The other was a girl with long hair and pale skin that shone even in the greyscale of the photograph. Her expression was stern, for she had listened to her father's request to be serious. Lorenzo traced his thumb over the rim of the amulet as he stared sadly at the pictures of himself and his sister.

“Alright, Francesca, where are you?” He whispered as he stuffed the memento back into his pocket. His eyes flashed an unnatural blue color as the shadows around him came more into focus. He flexed his fingers, and the darkness of the forest fell under his spell. And, in a sudden

moment, as if the earth beneath him had given way, Lorenzo walked into his own shadow. The only evidence of his presence was the smoldering stub of his cigarette, which slowly dimmed until its light vanished.

Lorenzo opened his eyes to find himself in a wispy, shadowy, altered version of the forest. His blue eyes were the only bits of color within the darkness. The unnatural realm clamped down hard upon his throat, as his intrusion was, as always, unwelcome. With little time before he asphyxiated, he ran into the forest depths.

With inhuman precision, he vaulted over roots, climbed through the branches, and leapt across gaps between the trees. In intervals of half a minute, he would emerge from the shadow realm, take a breath, take stock of his surroundings, and return to the darkness. This routine ran for several minutes, as Lorenzo found himself running through near-identical clearings and thickets. It wasn't until the last shreds of daylight sank below the mountains that he emerged from the shadows.

He stepped out from the side of a mangled tree and into a clearing that once belonged to a farmer's field. Fence posts have been devoured by thorns and trees. All that remained of a house was the stone foundation, which had been shattered and rent by roots. Lorenzo walked along the side, following a trail of ruins. Trucks which had been subsumed into tree trunks, lampposts bent and broken, he even passed a house which had been raised into the forest canopy.

“Shit... I'm going to be here all night if I don't find something.” He muttered. A mental itch began to gnaw at him as his anxiety flared, so he flicked his wrist and, from his own shadow, conjured a plain cigarette along with an ornate golden lighter.

Before he could light up, a thunderous boom caught his attention. His head snapped up, and in an instant, he conjured two pistols from his shadow. In a dizzying moment, the whole

forest began to shift, as roots slithered through the ground like snakes and the trees groaned in anger.

Lorenzo braced himself against the remains of a dilapidated house as he surveyed the source of the sound. In the distance, he saw the glow of a roaring fireball; the trees moved around it, as if they were trying to cage whatever it was inside. With a grunt, Lorenzo dove into the shadows once more and sprinted towards the explosion.

Even with the physical safety the realm of shadows provided, Lorenzo fought to make his way through the shifting forest. With a leap through a closing gap, he managed to break through the tree wall and land in the field. In the shadow realm, the fire appeared as a ball of blinding white light. Lorenzo held his hand up to block it, as he tried to make out the details around it.

His eyes focused enough to see a spirit. It was a pale silver wisp that reminded Lorenzo of the way the stars shone. Around it, a dozen thorny humanoid shapes descended upon it. They were golems, their spirits were a viscous green, and so small that Lorenzo could barely make them out. He rubbed his eyes to ensure that he had seen correctly before willing himself out of the shadow realm.

He emerged from the darkness, pistol held but concealed under his coat. Now back in the material plane, he could see that the fireball originated from a small campsite. A canvas tent had caught flame, and a massive pile of logs and twigs sat before it. As if to make it worse, a thin layer of magic covered the entire campsite. Lorenzo assumed it was the remains of a ward or barrier. But regardless of what it had been, the remaining magic refracted the flames.

Before the campsite, a blonde woman dressed in a mud-stained blouse and pants grappled with several rotten thorn golems. From the tips of her fingers, bright streaks of starlight leapt and

burned through the thorns. But for every hole she made, the vines of the golems would fill in the injury. Be it from adrenaline or by sheer overwhelming force, the woman did not notice Lorenzo.

“Oh, what the hell... who are you?” Lorenzo shook his head and groaned.

Annoyed, he held out his hand and focused on the two nearest golems to the woman. His shadow unnaturally stretched across the ground before it latched onto the golem's own shadows. Suddenly, the two golems, poised to stab the mysterious woman, froze before suddenly lurching back and striking at the other monstrosities behind them.

Lorenzo's fingers cracked as he puppeted the golems, exerting his will over their pathetic spirits. The woman paused, and in a brief moment of clarity, took note of Lorenzo and his interference.

“Thank you!” She said with a surprised smile.

With the opening created, the woman channeled celestial power into her hands before throwing them up towards the sky. From her fingertips, she conjured the image of an archer from starlight above her head. The constellation drew several arrows from its quiver and loosed a great volley forth upon the golems. In an instant, the mob was burned into naught but ashes, save for the charred remains of human skeletons that had served as the anchors for the vines. The woman approached the bodies and shook her head.

“You poor people... may your bodies be able to rest now...” She whispered.

The constellation she had conjured vanished soon after, and she approached Lorenzo. But before she could get within an arm's length of him, he withdrew his pistol and aimed it towards her chest.

“Look. I'm not here to hurt you. But I need you to do both of us a favor and leave this place right now.” He said as he angled the barrel off towards the side.

The woman's smile melted into a look that was half concerned, half annoyed. But out of an obligation to his threat, she put her hands up. She opened her mouth to respond to him, but stopped as the trees behind them began to shift once more.

"Look out!" She yelled just as the tree roots launched up from the ground in an attempt to impale Lorenzo. With mere moments before his demise, he was able to dip into his own shadow. The woman rolled out of the way of the roots, casting another wave of starlight to ward them away.

As she regained her footing, she looked around for Lorenzo, who emerged from behind her.

"Can you use that archer spell again?" He asked as he grabbed her shoulders. The woman nodded and broke into a sprint towards the treeline. She held her hands up and once again summoned the constellation of the archer, which blasted a large hole cleanly through the treeline.

"Go!" He yelled, and together they ran towards the gap.

Before either of them could escape, the roots of the trees attempted to seal the gap. Lorenzo reached his hands out and once again assumed control over the plants. He bent his fingers, and the weak-spirited roots snapped under his control.

The two of them ran through the treeline and sprinted into the darkness. The forest shifted as it attempted to catch up with them. But the two were just barely able to outpace the violent will of the forest.

---

They hid amongst the ruins of a farmhouse, of which only tattered walls and a collapsed ceiling remained. In the center of the house, a mighty tree had taken root, though seemingly it was not affected by the hatred its brethren had been infected with.

Lorenzo slouched against the wall, producing his lighter and cigarette as he caught his breath. The woman, uninterested in his actions, stepped forward and placed a hand on the tree in the center of the ruins.

“These poor trees.” She pressed her forehead against the bark, “They’ve been enslaved to the source of this blight.”

From her palm, starlight leapt out and traced the bark's pattern.

“What are you doing?” Lorenzo asked, though the woman did not answer. After he finished lighting his cigarette, he took a breath before speaking.

“You’re one of those forest freaks, right? What are you doing here? Are you alone?” His series of questions brought the woman out of her focus, and she turned to address him.

“You mean a Druid? You ignorant brute.” Her voice dripped with discontent.

Lorenzo rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Just answer the questions.”

“And who are you to be so demanding?” She put her hands on her hips.

“Nobody of particular importance. I’m sorry you got mixed up in this mess. But this cursed place has nothing to do with your ilk. On my honor, I swear I’ll destroy this blight.” He said.

The woman wrinkled her nose and scoffed.

“It has *everything* to do with my ‘ilk’. This blight has not only destroyed a small town but is also infesting the surrounding landscape far faster than anyone would appreciate. I’ve lost two other druids to this god-forsaken forest, and I will *not* leave this place until the evil here is

extinguished. My order swore an oath to protect the natural world, including the world of men, from corruption. And as it stands, the earth cries out, suffering from this cancerous growth. The sources of this infection need to be weeded out before more damage is caused.”

Lorenzo only sighed and dragged his fingers across his face in response before muttering to himself.

“Besides,” Veronica continued, “What’s a gangster like you doing in the countryside? What’s the matter, couldn’t make it in the big city, so now you’re here to bleed the natural world dry?”

Anger flared up in Lorenzo’s chest, but was doused by another draw of his half-burnt cigarette.

“Sure. Whatever you say, lady. I’ll say whatever it is you wanna hear if it means you leave this hell hole and let me make things right.” He responded with a plume of smoke.

Silence fell between them. Lorenzo took to getting lost in his thoughts, while only paying slight attention to his companion. Meanwhile, the woman took to analyzing his person. His clothes, his slouched posture, and his messy red hair. She pursed her lips and spoke.

“Why are you here? I’ll leave if you’re honest.”

Lorenzo looked at her incredulously.

“On my honor.” She said as she put her hand over her heart, which prompted Lorenzo to roll his eyes.

“I’m here on personal business. Nothing to do with money or my family. I’m just trying to make right a mistake I made.”

“Be specific.” She said in a surprisingly caring tone.

Lorenzo groaned and shook his head in disbelief at himself.

“It’s my sister, alright. She’s the source of the blight. I’ve been out on business for a few years, and... I wasn’t there for her when she needed me. Now she’s gone and caused his mess.” He gestured to the ruins around them, “I just want to find her and calm her down, take her somewhere safe where she can’t be hurt or hurt others.”

Another moment of silence fell between the two, where they spent it staring at one another. It wasn’t until the woman’s stoic expression cracked with a smile that she spoke.

“I thought you said this had nothing to do with your family.”

Lorenzo’s expression went through a three-stage metamorphosis of confusion, then shock, until finally evolving into deadpan and unimpressed.

“I’m just joking, lighten up, Erebus.” She chuckled.

“Don’t call me that.” He grumbled,

The woman dusted off her hands and leaned against the wall Lorenzo sat against. She slid down to be at his side and turned to him.

“I promised I’d leave, and I will if you still want me to. But I believe we should work together. I’ll help you find your sister, and if we can heal the corruption that’s taken her over, we’ll save both this land and her.”

Lorenzo pondered her offer during the short duration the rest of his cigarette lasted. After one last exhausted sigh, he stamped out the butt under his shoe and met the woman’s gaze.

“Deal.” He said as he reached out his coarse and calloused hand. With no hesitation, she took his hand and shook it.

---

They moved together through the forest in near silence. For the first few minutes of their trek, the only sound between them was the crunch of their footsteps on dead leaves and the occasional hum of the woman's magic as she held her palm up to the trees.

"The trees are whispering because they don't want to be heard by your sister. But they're trying to point us in the right direction." She said as she stepped away from the tree. She pointed in the direction of what was a road, having been overgrown with a thick layer of vines.

Lorenzo nodded and took the lead on the path; meanwhile, he clenched the amulet in his pocket.

"What's your name?" The woman asked after jogging to catch up with him.

"You first." He said, not so much as taking his eyes off the path.

The woman rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath, "Gangsters..."

Lorenzo shot her an annoyed glance, and she played off her comment with a smile.

"My name is Veronica. Now cough yours up, pal." She said, morphing her accent into a bad impersonation of a gangster.

"Lorenzo." He answered, only somewhat amused.

Veronica sounded out his name in silence, before nodding, because he at least somewhat looked like a Lorenzo, though her eyes darted to his bright orange hair with suspicion.

"What family are you from?" She asked.

"That doesn't matter. I don't associate with them anymore." He answered.

"You're very protective of your name, too many deals with fae?" She said,

"Worse. Devils." He said.

After a moment, Lorenzo stopped walking and faced her.

"Why are you so..."

“Aloof?” She asked.

Lorenzo shook his head. “No, not quite aloof. You’re just... very jokey.”

“I’m just trying to make this experience more bearable, Lorenzo.” Veronica smiled as she lightly tapped him on the shoulder, “Come on, let’s not keep your sister waiting.”

As the duo's excursion continued into the night, they were occasionally waylaid by packs of vine golems. The hours stretched on between the skirmishes. Starlight and shadows danced together as the two cut through the blighted forest. It wasn't until the waning hours of the night that they found what they searched for.

The forest's whispers had led them to the bank of a long and coiling river. Upon reaching it, Veronica paused and took in a deep breath from her nose.

“The sound... the smell.” Veronica whispered, as she turned to look up river, “She’s there.”

Lorenzo followed her gaze. His breath hitched and his eyes went wide. Sat upon a creaky wooden bridge was a girl in a cream colored dress. Her hair was as pale as moonlight save for orange threads on her bangs, and her skin like that of a porcelain doll. She hummed to herself as she brushed her hair. Her eyes were fixed upon the meandering river beneath her. But not a moment after Lorenzo laid his eyes upon her, she gently lifted her head upright to meet the gaze of her brother.

Veronica looked at Lorenzo and opened her mouth, but struggled to find the words. She gulped and took a step back and whispered.

“Go talk to her. Whatever happens, I’ll help you.”

Lorenzo nodded and stepped into his own shadow, before reappearing at his sister's side from her own shadow. She looked down at him from her perch on the railing.

“Francesca.” He said, his voice shook but his expression was stoic.

The woman merely scoffed in response, shifting away from him.

On instinct, Lorenzo reached out to her, but paused and relaxed himself.

“Francesca, I’m sorry.” He said.

“For what?” She asked, her eyes narrowed to a glare.

“For not being there for you. For leaving you alone with our father. I... I asked him to leave you alone if I did what he asked, I tried to protect you-”

“You abandoned me!” She shrieked. Her hair coiled and shot up into the air as if it was a den of angered serpents. Within her eyes a tempest roared, and the forest around her groaned as her anger flared.

“I only wanted to keep you safe.” Lorenzo said as his heart panged.

Francesca remained silent, but the forests around them came to life. Trees once again shifted and roots began to bind together. From further down the riverbank, Veronica had to jump out of the way of a collapsing tree. She began to run towards the bridge, shouting.

“Lorenzo! Quickly grab her before she does something rash!”

Francesca’s furious glare shifted from her brother to the intrusive Druid. She bared her pale yet black coated teeth towards the other woman.

“He’s lying to you.” She said, prompting Veronica to stop.

Lorenzo blinked, confused, turning between Veronica and his sister.

“W-what do you mean by that?” Veronica asked.

“He’s only here so he can bring me back to father. He wants to buy his way back into his good graces after being a failure for all his life.” Francesca said, her every word coated with venom.

“I... what?!” Lorenzo stepped towards his sister, who only hissed at his approach. Panicked, Lorenzo turned to face a stunned Veronica. She darted her eyes back and forth between the twins, until finally landing on Lorenzo. He looked as if he had just been stabbed in the back, he shook with some combination of anger and shock, and only found it in himself to face Veronica.

“Veronica, I never wanted to hurt her,” He said, relaxing, “But, I understand if you don’t believe me.”

Upon seeing his shift, Veronica snapped her attention to Francesca. She balled her fists tightly and stepped onto the bridge with an assertive stomp.

“You, corrupted one, you killed the people of this town and used their remains to seal yourself away from the consequences of your actions,” As she spoke she reached her hands out and conjured the constellation of a woman bound in chains, “I won’t let you hurt anyone else. Not even your brother.”

With a clang, the starlight chains shot forward towards Francesca. With moments to spare, Lorenzo dove in the way of the spell which wrapped around his arms and pulled. With what might he had Lorenzo was able to keep himself up right.

“Lorenzo! What are you doing?” Veronica shouted.

“Give me a second!” Lorenzo yelled, before turning back to his sister. “Francesca, please we can talk about-” but before he could finish his sentence the bridge beneath them began to rumble. Vines from the forest stretched out and coated every board and stone that made up the bridge, snapping them and shifting the construction to Francesca’s will. She twisted her fingers as she snarled at her brother.

“You idiot! Stop pretending like you love me!” She shrieked before, making the section of the bridge beneath him give way. But before he could fall into the river, Veronica pulled on the chains around his wrist, and pulled him towards the bank where he landed with a thud, whereupon the chains unbound themselves from his wrists.

Veronica had half a mind to smack Lorenzo for his interference, but instead focused her attention towards Francesca. She launched another volley of chains towards the corrupted thaumaturge, but part of the bridge snapped upwards and blocked her hairs.

“Damn it! Lorenzo you idiot!” Veronica cursed.

The man crawled onto his feet and shot her an apologetic look, just as Francesca finished her construction. Towering above even the largest of trees, the bridge had morphed into a humanoid shape, with its stones as its feet and the wood making up the bulk of its jagged and bulky body. At the top, where the head would be, Francesca sat glaring down at the two of them.

“Die!” She said as the bridge golem raised its arm up before bringing it down upon them. Instead of dipping into his shadow, Lorenzo grabbed Veronica’s arm and pulled her out of the way of the fist. The two of them sprinted into the treeline, and Francesca’s golem crawled out of the river to pursue them.

The ground trembled as Lorenzo and Veronica fled. Despite the golems hulking size, it kept pace with the two, the tree around it shifted out of its way or collapsed under its feral charge. As it went, Francesca willed the golem to pluck some of the trees from the ground, before hurling them at the duo with a feral scream.

“Veronica!” Lorenzo shouted before disappearing into his shadow to avoid a tree that was sure to crush him.

“What?” She asked as she conjured her archer constellation just in time to blast the tree meant to crush her. Lorenzo reappeared at her side before he spoke.

“Do you trust me?” He asked.

“After that last stunt you just pulled? I’m starting to have my doubts.” She strained as she shot down another tree sent hurling towards them.

“I need you to trust me! I have a plan!” As he spoke he reached his hand out to her. Veronica glanced back in time to see the golem leap forward to try and grab them. She grabbed his hand and together they sank into the shadow of the golem. While inside Veronica began to choke, coughing and sputtering as Lorenzo ran forward. Behind them, the white wisp of Francesca’s spirit flared with anger as she ravaged the patch of earth they had disappeared into.

Veronica and Lorenzo ran until they found the partially intact remains of a truck, whereupon out of Francesca’s sight, they left the shadow realm and returned to the material world. Veronica took in a deep breath while Lorenzo sputtered and coughed blood onto the grass.

“Oh my God, Lorenzo. Are you okay?” She heaved as she helped sit him up against the truck.

“Never better.” Lorenzo smiled as blood stained his teeth and poured from his bloodshot eyes. Veronica gasped at the sight and grabbed hold of his face.

“What happened to you?”

“I can walk through the shadow realm without issue, but bringing someone else in means I have to pay a blood tithe.” He said, as his eyes stared off into nothing, “Just give me a minute to get the blood out of my eyes first.”

Veronica took a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed it across Lorenzo’s face, upon removing the fresh blood she held her palms out and channeled starlight into his injuries. Above

her head the constellation of a chalice formed. The celestial power was an odd mixture of cold and warm, and it stung as Lorenzo's injuries slowly sealed themselves under Veronica's spell. She sighed as her power began to wane, and stopped her healing.

"Can you see?" She asked.

"A little." He answered after blinking.

"Is that enough to make your plan work?"

"It'll have to be." Lorenzo said as he poked his head over the truck and towards the direction of Francesca's rampage. Her screams boomed through the forest as she sent houses, trucks, trees flying as she tore through the land. He cursed under his breath before turning back to Veronica's general direction.

"Good thing is she's distracted. Bad news is the only way we'll be able to get close enough to her is by going through the shadow realm again. I'll get you on top of her golem, but do you have enough power to tie her up?"

Veronica shook her head and seized Lorenzo's shoulders.

"No. I don't want you blinding yourself." She said, gravely.

"Veronica. Do you have enough power?" he asked again.

The woman sighed before punching his shoulder, and nodding. Lorenzo grinned and reached his hand out to her.

"Do you trust me?" He asked.

"Like I said. I have my doubts." She answered, smiling as she took his hand. And together the two of them vanished into the realm of shadows.

A few meters away Francesca ended her rampage and began to sporadically glance around for the two of them. Her breathing was ragged and wheezy, her eyes were wide open and

every sound around her made her flinch. It wasn't until Veronica and Lorenzo were upon her golems shoulders that she noticed.

Lorenzo's face was caked in blood and he stumbled on his feet as Veronica channeled her final constellation. With a shout she launched her chains towards Francesca, which wrapped around her wrists. The golem shuddered as Francesca's control waned. She pulled and pried at the chains as Veronica slowly began to drag the other woman towards her.

"No! I won't... I won't let you cage me! Leave me alone!" Her hair flared up once again as power surged through her network of vines. The golem's anatomy collapsed as its shoulder shot up around Veronica like a cage. Her celestial chains snapped as the cage began to slowly collapse around her, thorny vines cut at her arms and legs as she was slowly but surely going to be crushed.

As Francesca tightened her grip, a shadow shifted behind her. Much to both her and Veronica's shock, Lorenzo had not passed out from blood loss. Coated in crimson the man who was barely able to stay on his feet reached out and pulled his sister into a hug.

"I'm sorry. Please. I just want to help you. Please, just let me help you."

For a moment, she stood there, frozen. Her breath caught in her throat as she stammered and shook. It had been the first time in years since the twins had held one another. Despite his eyes being caked in blood, a single tear managed to fall from Lorenzo's cheek and onto Francesca's shoulder.

"Get off me!" She shrieked, and the golem fell apart in its entirety. She willed the last of her power into one great explosion which split Lorenzo away from her. The last thing he saw was his sister, looking down at him with utter contempt and scorn in her eyes, before everything went dark.

---

Sunlight was the first thing Lorenzo saw. His eyes slowly opened, as he grunted in pain.

“Lorenzo!” Veronica said, surprised. She adjusted herself and cupped his face, trying to help him open his eyes.

“Lorenzo, wake up!”

“Ah... Veronica? Don’t yell...” he grumbled as he finally opened his eyes. They were back against the partially intact truck they had found before their final fight with Francesca. The sun had slowly begun to creep over the horizon, casting its relative warmth onto the two of them. Upon his memory catching up with him, Lorenzo bolted up right and began to look around.

“Where is she? Where’s Francesca?” He asked. Veronica, who still sat on the ground, tugged at his suit sleeve and pointed in the direction where their battle had concluded. Lorenzo peered over the truck to see that, for what appeared to be miles ahead, the forest had vanished. In its place the ground had been chewed up by the roots, and the trees, along with their master had fled from the valley.

Silently, Lorenzo fell to his knees before leaning against the truck. In frustration he slammed his head against the vehicle and groaned in pain both mental and physical.

“Lorenzo...” Veronica started as she reached out to him. He snatched her hand and shot her a stern expression.

“Don’t,” he said before letting her go.

Veronica took her hand back and rubbed her wrist. Her face contorted in betrayal and pain.

“Thank you, for saving me.” She said, as she sat back against the truck, “Please don’t hurt yourself like that again. You have no idea what I went through to make sure you didn’t go blind.”

Lorenzo glanced down at her palms, which were covered in scars and dried blood. His anger melted and regret flooded his chest.

“Veronica, I’m sorry.” He whispered as he placed his hand over hers. Slowly and gently he took hold of her hands and helped her rise to her feet. Once on their feet, Lorenzo held Veronica’s hands in his and said,

“By my honor, as a man from the house Napolitano, I swear I will repay this debt. You have saved my life, and in turn, I swear my fealty to you. Until my debt is paid and I have saved your life.”

Veronica stood in silence, stunned into silence by his gesture. Be it from the warmth of the morning sun or her proximity to Lorenzo a slight flush washed over her face before she cracked a smile.

“Oh, you’re such a gentleman.” She laughed.

“I’m nothing if not.” Lorenzo shook his head in amusement.

“A few hours ago you had me at gunpoint.” She said, turning towards the destruction left in Francesca’s wake.

“I’ll have you know I only did that out of respect for your thaumaturgical power.” He said.

“Oh, hush.” She laughed, pushing his hands into his chest. As the two of them began their march, the sun rose over the mountains, casting its light upon a small metal sign that once stood upon the side of the road. It read, *Ashford city limits, five miles*