

WITCH

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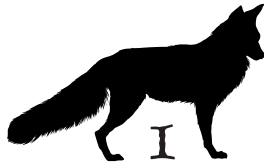
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I never did no magick.

Not at the time they said, anyways.

It was Mother who heard them. Mother could hear a frog hiccup from a mile yonder. She could whisper out a blackcap nesting in the trees. Mother had old ways, from far across the sea. And that's what she looked to teach us. Perhaps that's what led to it all. All the blood. And the death.

When Mother hollered us, I didn't see them. Dill pointed down.

'There, Eveline, there low!'

I saw them. The skulkers. Men. Horses. They were coming. They knew us.

No matter that Mother healed them. Cured their stock. Smacked their children into the world. Here they came, like whelps. Boys to fetch us in. Scared. Angry. Men.

'Dill, get!'

We ran fleet foot, wind after catching us, and we found Mother, leaning on her staff. She pressed a bag to me. She was pale as birch bark. She could not run. Her leg was twisted and scarred like a root grown wrong.

‘They’re coming!’ Dill pulled at Mother, who only bent to stroke dirt from her cheek.

‘Here, my Dilly Dee...’

She opened Dill’s hand to place something. It sat round and black and heavy on Dill’s thin fingers. The Wolf Tree Stone. Mother’s scrying stone. Then she looked me sharp.

‘Get to the coven. Find my sister. Look to Dill. Go now!’

I remember that. Her face like wax settled on wood. Her lips split. Her eyes all fire.

‘Evey, swear you will ever look to Dill.’

Her face so fierce with love. I heard shouts. They were close.

‘For my blood, your blood, your sister’s blood...’ She pushed against me. ‘Swear it and go, Evey!’

And this I have of her always. Her mouth, shouting, furious at me.

‘I do swear it, Mother...’ Then I took Dill’s hand and we ran.

We ran to the near wood. Like rabbits before the dogs. That’s what they were, see. Not men, but dogs

that stank and slavered. We made the trees when I heard a shriek that shanked deep as a knife.

Dill wanted back, but that wouldn't be. She pulled at me, kicked and scratched. Mother let shriek again. I remember her cry, like a fox snared.

'Evey, they're hurting her... EVEY!'

But I held Dill fast. She gripped Mother's stone, her fingers tight white.

'Hush it, Dill – we'll be caught.'

There were four of them. They had broken her staff. They had ripped her dress. Mother brought her arm to her breasts, as she swayed upon her good leg, her dark hair flying, her eyes coals in the fire.

I knew then. She saw her end.

And in that moment, she saw theirs.

'Touch not my children!' Her voice echoed to the watching sky. 'Or I swear it, you all...' She pointed at the four who watched her. 'You all will die!'

She was so strong, so beautiful, so alone.

Then one came close and struck her face.

I felt it like he struck my own. I stopped my mouth from crying out.

Mother fell.

How I wanted to run to her. Swing high to skewer those dogs. But I had no blade. They were too many. And I would break Mother's bond.

Go, Evey. For me. For Dill.

My sister twisted like a wild cat. But I held her good, as a tall one turned about, as if he caught our scent. Quick I pulled Dill lower as she moaned over.

‘Mother, Mother, Mother...’ Her fingers pulling at mine.

And my guts churned with shame for our hiding, as I marked him, this Tall One with his long black hat. He raised his arm high, like as to hail me. Then let it fall, and his men sprang to. Laughing, shouting, they lifted Mother, as she struggled in their grip.

I couldn’t go. They were too many.

Evey.

They brought Mother to the ground and laid her arm. And the largest, he ran and he jumped, like a boy at play. He jumped and snapped her arm. That sound, breaking like an old branch in the wood where we hid. He snapped her arm. And Mother shrieked and rolled as they laughed like dogs. Like men.

They closed around her. I could not see.

Please.

Four men.

For me.

They beat her.

For Dill.

Over and again.

Go. Now.

Then I felt it.

I could not run to her, but I could curse them.

So I did. I cursed them with all my fury.

'Know this, I will not rest till balance got.

Till time turned back. Till light be sought.

Till dogs be dirt and death be done.

Till then. Only then, know this.'

I held Dill's face to my chest, away from their blows.

They shouted with glee. They pushed her down. Still she raised to her knees, her arm hanging as a spider's thread broken in the breeze.

'My children!'

Her voice echoed, so that I will ever hear it. There was stillness and there was Mother and the men and us watching and our hearts beating.

Then another stepped forward. He was young, not yet a man. He raised his musket high.

Mother looked up to this brave boy. She spat.

He swore and swung that musket so swift and smote her skull. She rolled, then did not move, in the mud.

And we knew Mother was dead.

'No. NO!'

Dill pushed at me, crying, but I grabbed her mouth. She was little then. She wasn't strong much. Fast like a cat, but light as a bird was Dill.

'Shush, or we'll be got!' Pain tore my voice. 'Shush, now, Dill, you... you hear!'

Dill's tears ran over my hand, her eyes screaming. Yet she nodded, as she shook.

They were standing about Mother. Voices low, butchers weighing a pig. Some pissed. Like dogs. Like dogs. Then Tall One pushed and shouted at that brave boy who killed our mother.

'The witch was for trial, boy! We still have not the children!'

I felt cold creep across my body, my hairs standing. They knew us, sought us. The brave lad shouted back, for he was not afeared.

'You saw – she cursed me! You have to kill 'em quick so it will not take!'

He spat upon Mother and kicked her withered leg. I fought to snatch Mother's stone from Dill and run to him and smash his face. But I could not, I could not.

'Find them!' Tall One turned to that thin man, that heavy brute, that brave lad, all those dogs who I marked true. 'Find them now!'

We had to fly, Mother.

I cursed them and cursed them good. Everything
you gave me, I gave to them.

Tall One roused his pack towards the woods.

We flew for our hearts.

We flew for you.



We were running in the dark wood, Dill close to.

Little she was, but she could fly all the same.
Time past I chased her tawny legs through summer's
dusk. When we ran as sisters not as rabbits, feared for
our skins.

We fell to a stream, cupped our faces, drinking
deep. Then we stood in the running water. Far-off
shouts now, not near. Those dogs were slow.

A sparrow flitted to a branch above, and cried,
This way, this way, this way. Dill breathed hard as
she listened. The stream pressed cold about our feet.
We saw ourselves in the water. Dill, skin and bone,
pale as morning milk, her hair black and thick as a
rook's nest. And me taller, my cheeks, my arms all
mottled over, like drops of brown rain, my hair long
and red. The colour of anger, Mother used to say. And
the song she sang for me, came babbling through that
green water.

*'Evey Red Braid,
watch thy mist.
Evey Red Locks,
drop thy fist.'*

Dill smiled to the girls in the water. The younger waved to see her. But her sister frowned and said, 'Silly mite. This is not the time for playing. Come now.'

We brooked the stream, smooth stones under foot and held at roots to make the bank. I listened true. No dog came barking. Dill's hand was soft and small as a mouse in mine. We passed through the wood, and after a time, we saw it, sitting far away, smoke lifting, like hair in the wind.

'Why there, Evey?' She pointed to town with her fist curled about the black stone.

'Because that's where dogs will home to sleep.'

And I swear, Mother. I never will let them lie. Only in death.

Only then.