

## Sphagnum

My footprints are edged with salt as they leave a silvery trail across the bog. The scent of peat is heavy in the air, I can taste it as it coils down my throat. The earth stretches dark and dank in front of me, the sky reaching in fingers of grey towards my head. The whisper of bird song trails through the air. My bare ankles are ringed with mud, it's heavy and clinging and so wonderfully dissimilar to sand and sea. Nothing is like my home, but as I see the cottage on the island in the middle of the bog, I smile.

The air barely touches me, I feel like I should wave my arms – I forget when I am gone from here, what the world is like without the weight of water. The cottage is ancient, so old the stone looks like it has become part of the bog, or the bog has become part of it. It leans down, bending like a hand has pushed it from high above. A single gnarled tree looms above it and stones gleam above the mud – one true path to the door. Eve did always love an entrance. The lights are on, streaming out of the windows, bright against the lowering skies. I set a foot on the stones, smooth from thousands of steps – I wonder how many are my own – and then I am standing in front of the green door. No matter how much the cottage weathers the door is always green.

I knock.

A voice, a beautifully familiar voice, calls from within in. "It's not locked."

I turn the handle and the door swings open.

"Maud, I'm in the kitchen."

I put my bag on the floor and walk down the short hallway, calling. "How did you know it was me?"

I open the kitchen door, and there she is. My Eve. She turns to face me, a knife still in her hand, the roots she was cutting sending earthy notes into the air.

She walks towards me. "I could smell the salt as soon as you entered the bog."

She stops an arms width from me and looks me up and down. "You're older. I like the silver."

I touch the grey in my dark hair. "Yes, well I guess it had to happen eventually."

She smiles, darkly. "Did it?"

I can't help rolling my eyes. To me Eve is about as menacing as a hedgehog, no matter how she tries to be dark and mysterious. "Yes, Time will not be held at bay forever as you well know." I gesture, taking in the new lines on her face.

She traces the lines around her eyes and her smile softens. "I do know. She is a cruel mistress." She reaches out a hand towards me. "Can I hug you?"

"If you put the knife down, let's not give Time too much of a helping hand."

"Of course." Eve laughs. The knife drops with a clatter and I am in her arms. I know I have seen many spectacular things, it comes with being a sea hag, but being in Eve's arms is still one of the most incredible things above or below the waves. And certainly the most incredible thing in this bog. I don't say anything. I just hold her, and I can feel her as she relaxes into my arms and I fold into her. We lay the bog witch and the sea hag aside and for those heartbeats, we are us.

Eventually she squeezes me tight and says. "Tea?"

"Tea." I settle at the scrubbed wooden table as she puts the kettle on the stove. Eve gathers herbs from jars and drops them in two earthenware mugs. She turns to me. "How's the sea?"

"Wet. How's the bog?"

"Muddy." She chuckles and leans her back against the wooden bench. "Seriously though, how is it going?"

I pause for a moment, thinking. I need to approach this slowly. And then I look back up at her, resisting the urge to stand up and tuck an errant curl back behind her ear. "I get less and less supplicants as the years pass. No one seems to want to want to bring me their problems anymore, I get a few of the old timers, regulars you know."

The kettle whistles and Eve pours the tea, handing me a cup and settling down in the chair opposite mine. "Yeah, I know exactly what you mean I have them too. The ones who'll still brave the willow-whisps, cross the stones, you know."

I wrap my hands around the cup, breathing in the comforting steam, it smells of old growth forests. "I do." I echo her. I blow on my tea and then look up at Eve. Her eyes are warm and brown, and understanding. "It's kind of sad, but I guess I don't mind the quiet. I've done a lot of reading over the last couple of decades, and I've actually had the chance to fix up my tower. Salt water is murder on books. I've put in glass and proper heating. I figured centuries spent freezing was payment enough."

“You haven’t tried Instagram? It’s a whole new world of supplicants. #BogWitchLife is trending. I get all sorts now. My potions are even selling.”

“I’ve more been on Etsy. It’s amazing how popular crafts made from shells are. And I don’t even have to do the work, the molluscs are all trained. But it’s not the same.” A thought suddenly comes to me. “Oh I brought you a gift.” I stand to run up the hallway to my bag.

Her voice calls after me. “Other than yourself?”

I’m back quickly, it’s not a long hallway. “Well done, I see what you did there.”

Eve stands and dips a curtsey. “Why thank you.”

Do you want your present or not?”

“Of course”

I hand her the wrapped brown package and we settle back down at the table. I lean into the sunlight that breaks through a cloud and pools on my face. The caress of the sun still feels a little miraculous to me. “It’s not that exciting.” I can’t help cautioning. “It’s just narwhal cheese and dried dead man’s bootlaces.”

Eve grins. “Cheese and bootlaces are always exciting. Thank you.” She inhales as the package falls open. “Oh that’s glorious, thank you.” Her eyes widen. “Does that mean Corny’s breeding again?”

“I wish you wouldn’t call her that, it’s not dignified.”

“She’s a narwhal, not the Queen of the Deep. Besides, she likes it.”

I can’t stop the smile on my face. “Unfortunately you’re not wrong. And yes, *Blóðughadda* had a calf about six months ago. Her name’s Himinglæva.”

“That must be fun.” Eve’s voice is dry.

“Yes she, she really like headbutting things. It’s going to be interesting when her tusk grows properly.”

Silence falls, spooling gently around us. I sip my tea, letting its warmth soak through me. Eve eventually says. “Not that I’m not pleased to see you. But are you here for a reason?”

I put my cup down.

Even leans in. “The tea is down, now I know this is serious.”

I chew my lip gathering my thoughts.

“Salt water’s not good for the bog.”

I look up at Eve. "What?"

She gestures at the water forming a puddle beneath my chair, rising towards me. I sigh. "Sorry." I hop out of the chair and crouch down. I trail a finger through the water, it shivers under my touch. "It's alright, thank you for coming but I'm not in danger. I don't need your help right now. I promise I'll come home soon." The water rises just a little more, defiantly, and then drains back through the flood boards. I get back in my chair and smile at Eve. "Sorry about that."

"It's not a problem. It's part of you. I get that." She reaches over and takes my hand. "Now, what's wrong? Something obviously is."

"We've known each other a long time."

"By human measurement of years, yes. It's been 662 years since you used the Great Drowning of Men to invade my bog."

"You mean we met in The Great Drowning of Men when your bog got in the way of my ocean." I can't resist.

She laughs. "Alright have it your way. Myself and my bog were sitting here perfectly quietly, when we very inconveniently to you got in the way of the greatest ocean flood in thousands of years."

"Exactly." I squeeze her hand. "But since then, I've loved you for centuries and you've loved me too. And I don't have anyone else to ask. They're all dead and –"

Eve puts her hand over mine. "Maud. I love you too. Stop wittering. What is it?"

"How does it all end?" It tumbles out of me.

Eve's eyes widen. "What do you mean? As in, the end of Time?"

I nod, face flushing. "I know it's silly, but the world is changing." I touch the silver at my hair. "I mean you noticed, I'm aging faster. It's not that I'm scared of an ending, of no longer being. But we don't really know when we became more than people. I mean I think I was born mortal, once."

"Me too, once, but it was so long ago." Her voice is distant.

I lean in. "That's what I mean, the gods are retreating. The Queen of the Deep has sunk below the deepest depths. Even the fish don't fear her anymore. The sea is becoming just a lot of water and the bog, your bog, it's drying and warming. The bodies are rising from the depths. How can we go on. What are we without them, a hag and a witch? Two old women thrust into a world that does not want us anymore, that does not need us anymore."

The words seem to hang heavy on the air. Eve breathes deeply, the steam from her tea curling loosely around her face. "You fear fading, drifting, withering with our realms."

"I fear being lost. Even to myself."

She squeezes my hand tight. "I can't say what will happen my love. The bog may wither and die, the sea may lose its stories. I cannot promise that it will all be okay. And yes we may step back into Time's heavy embrace. But." She holds up a hand. "But, I can promise one thing. We will still be us. Even as the last stone of your tower turns to sand and my cottage is claimed by the bog. We can still tell one story, and that is ours. We are a story writ large my Maud. And we will tell it again and again."

"We will be remembered?"

She smiles. "We will my dear. We will remember ourselves." She sniffs back tears, saying briskly. "Now drink your tea. I have lots of interesting bog developments to show you."

Eve stands and offers me a hand.

I take it.