

Awakening

The steady crunch of leaves echoed through the forest under the rhythmic drumming of a small pair of feet. It was dark still-dawn had yet to creep her way up into the sky and set it alight. Mist rose lazily over the trees, like tendrils reaching towards the stars. Abruptly, the figure walking through the forest halted. As the moon appeared from behind a cloud, it shone on a young girl-no more than fourteen, with fiery red hair and keen brown eyes. She opened them and blinked away sleep. Looking down at her hands, she noticed a bound book. The rich leather of the cover was smooth under her fingertips. The color of it nearly matched her skin tone. Confused, she looked around the forest to determine where, *exactly*, she was.

"The South Wood..." She murmured under her breath. A far cry from her warm bed, where she was supposed to be. How she kept ending up in the forest after falling asleep was a mystery to her, but that didn't matter now. Her hands began to sweat. Not only were the children of the village forbidden to enter the South Wood, but it was said that evil beings hid between the trees at night-waiting for disobedient children to gobble up.

Pulling her attention back to the tome in her grasp, she gingerly leafed through the pages. Images of strange creatures that she had never encountered chilled her to the bone as her eyes scanned them. Strange symbols were drawn on some pages in what appeared to be a dark red ink. One particular drawing caught her eye, and she found herself squinting and holding the book to the light in order to see it more clearly. Women, old and young, raising clasped hands in a circle over an enormous fire. This was not the aspect that drew her attention, however. Upon closer examination she realized that these women were unclothed, with long hair flowing down their backs. The girl had never seen a depiction such as this one, and she

longed to know what these women were doing. Just as she was about to flip to the next page, she heard the familiar chorus of roosters crowing, signaling the beginning of the work day.

“If I don’t return soon,” She worried aloud, “Mother and Father will know that I have been away. Father will surely have my head.” Glancing at the book one last time, she decided to hide it in the hollow of a tree before scampering home.

Opening the door of her house as silently as she could, she crept into the house. She sighed a breath of relief a moment too soon, for as soon as she did she heard her mothers voice from the kitchen fire.

“Just where have you been to at this hour, Joan?” She whispered angrily. Jumping with a start, Joan stuttered,

“N-Nowhere Mama! Only to the chicken coop, for I thought I heard a strange noise in the night. I only wanted to make sure that a fox hadn’t gone in to eat them. That is all.” She said this last part while staring at the whorls on the boards of the wooden floor.

“Tsk. Very well, child. Wake your father next time. I won’t have you being attacked by some wild animal in the middle of the night. The other families in the village would think it a bad omen, and then who would marry you?” She paused for a beat. “Come, help your mother with the bread baking.”

Joan shuffled over to the fire and began assisting her mother. A stray ember leaped from the fire as she placed another log on it, and burned a crescent shaped mark into her forearm. Joan hissed through her teeth at the pain, but her mother did not hear her.

Around noon, Joan was instructed to take the family's washing to the river with the other girls from the village. She dreaded this task. Ever since she was young, Joan had trouble getting along with the other children. All but Elizabeth. Elizabeth was her other half. At church, they always sat next to each other, thighs touching and giggling quietly to themselves while their parents gave them stern looks. When doing chores outside of the house, they did them together. Joan often found herself dreaming of running away with Elizabeth, away from their parents and the church and all of the foolish rules that prevented them from spending every waking minute with each other. They would have a cottage in the woods near the river, with a small farm and chickens. They would go on adventures together, run in the woods and splash in the cool waters of the burbling river during the summer. She spent most of her time thinking of this last part. Both of them with their hair down, unnecessary frocks stripped away and laughing without a care in the world. And maybe, just maybe, they would make eye contact and the playing would stop, as they drew themselves closer together and..."

"Joan! The washing, please." Joan was ripped out of her fantasy by her mother's call. She grabbed the basket and hauled it out the doorway. The walk to the river was no more than five minutes. Slightly outside of the town, it was the perfect distance away to get some peace and quiet while staying close to home. Joan allowed her thoughts to drift, until she was interrupted by what sounded like a chorus of whispers. Or was it the wind? She looked around and nervously quickened her pace.

Upon reaching the river, Joan's eyes scanned the bank for Elizabeth. She ran over to where Elizabeth was absentmindedly scrubbing a tunic.

"Elizabeth!" Joan beamed.

“Joan! Oh, how I’ve missed you. Come sit with me. You’ll make this dull work more interesting.” Joan smiled and plopped down next to her friend, and commenced with her chore. After a while, she glanced at Elizabeth from the corner of her eye.

“Elizabeth,” she began, “have you ever been into the South Wood?” Elizabeth’s hands immediately stopped moving, as she shifted her full attention to her companion.

“No, of course not. You know my father would never allow anything of the sort.” She replied. “Why do you ask?” This was said with a hint of curiosity, almost as if she had thought of venturing into the wood before.

“Last night-or this morning I suppose-I woke up there, and I was holding this strange book. It’s not too far from here.” Joan said hopefully, gauging Elizabeth’s reaction. Elizabeth glanced nervously back at the village, and then with a mischievous glint in her eyes and a cunning smile, nodded yes. They left their laundry at the riverside and dashed into the forest.

“Come, come.” Joan beckoned. “It’s just over here.” She reached into the familiar tree, and pulled out the book. They sat together on the forest floor, flipping through page after page, discussing the images and skipping over the text that they could not read. Finally, they reached the picture of the women that Joan had been so enthralled with earlier.

“Look, look at their hair.” Joan said, but as she was pointing to the page, her eyes were on Elizabeth, watching her soak it in. Elizabeth stroked the page with her fingertips.

“They look so beautiful...so free.” Elizabeth mused in a dreamy tone. Without really knowing what she was doing, Joan took Elizabeth's hand and gazed into her eyes. Her free hand moved slowly up to her white hair covering and undid the knot, never breaking eye contact. The cloth fell to the ground and her hair tumbled free.

“Your turn.” Joan whispered. Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, and then drew her hand to her hair, looking at the earth beneath them. It was then that they heard the stomping of feet through leaves, but it was too late. Before they could react, three men of the village stepped into the clearing that they sat in. One of whom Joan recognized as Elizabeth's father, looking more furious than she had ever seen him.

“What are you doing here?” He roughly grabbed Joan by the hair, and she screamed, clawing at his arm in an attempt to make him release her. He turned his piercing stare over to his daughter and her exposed tresses of hair, and then back to Joan. “Are you trying to make my daughter follow the Devil? What unholy rituals have you been revealing to her?” He picks up the book, still open on the page they had been on.

“Nothing, nothing, I swear.” Joan shrieked. “We were looking at the pictures, nothing more!” He shoved the book in her face.

“What pictures, worm? What wretched Devil-book have you forced my daughter to open?” And sure enough, when Joan looked at the book, the pages were blank. He began dragging Joan back to town, kicking, screaming and pleading the whole way. At the sound of the commotion, the people of the village were drawn out of their homes to see what could be the cause of such a horrible screeching. Joans parents ran out to see their daughter being lifted up by the collar of her dress.

“Come, behold, a servant of the Devil!” Elizabeth's father's voice boomed. “I caught this witch trying to sell my good daughter to her wicked master.” The people of the village gathered around in a semicircle, whispering amongst themselves. Joan's parents huddled together, her mother weeping and her father with a stern grimace on his face. The local priest stepped out from the crowd and attempted to reason with Elizabeth's father.

“Now, now, before we cast judgment, let us be sure that what you say is true. What evidence do you have of witchcraft?”

“Plenty.” He snarled. “I found this one with her hair unbound, attempting to force my sweet Elizabeth to do the same. No child of God would do such a thing!” The onlookers murmured in agreement. “She was bent over her book of spells, she was!” He held the leather book from the forest up as he spoke.

“Let me see this.” The priest commanded. The other man gave him the book and he flipped through the pages. “There is nothing here. If she truly is a witch, she may have cast a spell to make the writing disappear. What did she show you in this book, child?” He questioned, addressing Elizabeth. With tears streaming down her face, she replied,

“There was a picture, a-and words that I could not read. She brought me into the woods to show me the book, and she was the one that told me to uncover my hair. I did not know she was a witch, I swear!” This last part was wailed, as a new wave of tears hit her.

“She even bears the mark of the Devil!” Shouted Elizabeth's father. He roughly grabbed Joans wrist and held it aloft for all to see. The crescent burn mark was clearly visible. “He has

touched her with his fiery fingers! She will bring doom to us all, unless we put a stop to her evil deeds.” Gravely, the priest nodded. The people of the village gasped, and Joan’s mother’s crying grew louder. Rough hands grabbed her, and tied her to a stake in the ground near the crop fields. Her voice was so hoarse from screaming, that all Joan could do was cry. Men gathered spare logs and piled them around her. By the time they were done, the sun had begun to set. Joan had stopped crying. As Elizabeth’s father and the priest approached, she held her head high, hair blowing freely in the breeze.

“In the name of God, I smite thee, Witch!” Her former friend’s father proclaimed triumphantly. Joan glared at him through puffy eyes. If it was a witch they wanted, then it was a witch that they would get.