Forsaken Friends

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## Will-o'-Witch

There was a soft, lazy breeze, carrying nothing but the stuffy stench of the bog. It did wonders, sending chills down our sweat drenched spines, in this warm weather, and this forsaken situation

But, it's work, and someone has to do it.

I look down on my muddied hands, and I push a small Willie in the jar with the others, making sure none of them manage to escape.

They're relatively easy critters, Willies. They wandered around the edges of these lands, and tried to lure people onto unstable grounds, to feast on the decomposing corpses left behind. There was one corpse too many, and I was contracted. And as long as I remember, to not focus my sight on them, too much, and not follow them around, it was just a matter of picking them from the air.

They were going to get killed, but fortunately for the little ones, they didn't really leave any body, so, to prove my deed, I had to bring them to the guild live. They'd be crushed and put out, there.

It was really stupid, that someone even got out here, and got caught by these critters. Everyone in any vicinity of the bog knew, to stay away from it. That it had a magic about it. Creatures not of the gods, and people who turned their backs to them, lived there. It was a dark, labyrinthine place, that no one who entered came back to tell tales of.

And yet, tales were plentiful. People talked about an ancient being, made of swamp, that guarded the land, and cursed anyone who dared to enter. They talked about weird lights and sounds that could be heard from the middle of the swamplands. I myself have heard the thunderous crowing, that came from there, on one of my trips hither.

No one dared to go into the land, among the trees and unstable terrain, and tales of terror. Nobody, except fools like the person that started my contract. Rest he in peace.

I needed one more Willie, and I'd have enough to finish the contract. I looked around for one more, and found it, at the edge of the treeline. Taking care to not look at it.

too often, I made my way towards it. I focused mostly on the ground, to not sink too deep into the peat and mud.

Suddenly, a shadow hovered over me. I screamed, as a beastly, black talon grabbed hold of me, and I was flung into the air. I lost consciousness for a moment, and only got to, as my body hit the water of the swamp. The shadow was gone. There was a voice.

"You could have been a bit gentler with the boy, Morty.'

There was no reply.

"I know he's here to kill our friends. I know he's a hunter.
I'm just too kind sometimes "

At this moment, I saw, out of the darkness, a tangle of branches, moss and mud emerge, with the face of a human woman. I shrieked at the sight, and tried to turn around to run, but found myself struggling against some vines in the water.

At that moment, she found her sight fixed to the jar in his hands. A big branch swing around, and crashed directly into the jar, shattering it, and causing all the 19 tightly packed Willies to fly out in all directions, in a mass of light. They started gently floating around, after a second, and disappeared into the forest. Then the figure faded back into the darkness.

I was pulling on the vines, and finally got my body free, when I noticed the forest ceiling closing up over me. After a few moments of me trying to to get out of the water, as the darkness was creeping in, I could no longer see anything at all.

I tried feeling my way, and tried walking straight through the swamp, in the direction I thought I had come from. I was giving up hope, thought I was as good as dead, but after a bit of blind wandering, I started seeing a bit of daylight shine through the thicket in front of me.

I walked forward, towards the light. Nothing else was important to me, anymore. I just needed to survive. I needed to get out of here

Then, the daylight moved. It floated, slowly bobbing up and down, and drew closer to me. I stopped in my tracks. And noticed, I could not move any further. I was stuck, slowly sinking in the mud. The Willie illuminated my situation, allowing me to see, how I was nearly up to my knees in the ground. I had stepped right in.

I started praying for rescue.

I started praying for a guick death

My mouth was slowly sinking under, and I could only breathe through my nose. I could not breathe. The pain. The horror. All slowly fading.

## Big Soup

The sun shone in, through the tall window. The beams moved slowly across the floor, harvesting what little colours the bleached carpet and tiles had, before reaching the bed. It had curtains, though they've been patched so many times, you could no longer recognize the original material. Though slow, the light was high in perseverance, and did not let the patchy curtains let it stop. It's beams reached the face of the persor laving inside the mass of patched-up pillows and covers.

A groan signified, that the personage now slumping out of the comfort of a pillow nest has awakened.

There was a rhythmic, insistent scratching at the door. She looked up towards it, then groaned again. She went up to a small fountain, in the corner of the room, and splashed some water in her face. With a movement of her finger, some of the water coming out of the fountain momentarily turned into a surface of ice. She didn't have the best night, she realised, looking at the reflection, before the ice turned back into a misty splash of water, falling into the pool of the fountain.

"I know it's big soup day!," she said out loud. The scratching stopped. And then resumed, after a little bit of thought.

She sat back down on the bed, and combed her hair, then tied it into a neat ponytail. Then she finally got up, and opened the door.

On the other side of the door, stood a cauldron. It was cast to look, as if the legs were tiny little lion paws. One of them was missing. The front left one. At the front, there was a face, to look like a screaming or roaring lion, its mane spreading over the sides and bottom of the cauldron. There was a tear, a fracture, going down from the top of the front, all the way to the mouth of the lion, over one of its eyes. She had filled in the fracture with gold. She had heard, it was some ancient kind of magic. Not magic magic, but, thought magic. It changed how people look at things.

"Yes, Caul, we get to make big soup, today."

The cauldron hopped up, excitedly. Then it ran off, towards

the kitchen.

"Garden first, today."

It instantly changed the direction it was running at, and zoomed past her, again.

The hallways were cool and empty, still. Other than the tapping of lead feeties on the tiles, it was quiet. The tiles were slightly warm, she felt through her soles. It always felt like this place was slightly alive. There were paintings of people she did not know, and did not really care to know, scattered throughout.

She reached a smaller hallway, and after a short while longer, she arrived at the door to the backyard. Caul was already there, sat down beside it.

She grabbed the hat from the hanger just beside it, and went out.

The garden was in a state of ordered disarray. You can't really tell plants where to grow, if they don't really want to, after all. She looked into the shed, and took a knife from the worktop. She cut her index finger slightly, and let the blood drip into a carving she had made a couple of years ago. Then she conjured a few blocks of meat. She took them all, and cradling them in one hand, she took a bag of compost with the other.

She gave the bag of compost to Caul, who started taking its usual route through the garden, distributing it. She then went up to the corner of meat eating plants, who started turning towards her in interest. She threw a couple of the cubes at once, which the taller plants took no time to swallow up. She then cosied down to the smaller plants, and tore bits by bits of flesh off the cubes, to feed them.

By the time she was done, Caul had returned from its round, and they both went up to the epicenter of the vegetable part of the garden.

"Big Soup Day!," she yelled out in the garden.

The ground started vibrating, growing into a rumbling. Tiny hands sprung up from the soil below, and some of the vegetables started coming out. Roots and potatoes dug themselves out, while some tomatoes and beans started climbing down their vines. Some parts of herbs plucked themselves off, and started crawling on the ground. All of them, moving towards one point. They climbed up the sides, and jumped into Caul.

After the whole movement was over, and the earth was again still, she said: "Thank you."

She then went up to the big fruit tree, in the back of the garden, and sat down, leaning against it for a little bit.
Caul joined her, by her side. A black cat also appeared from

behind the tree, and curled up in her lap. She reached into Caul, and the vegetables helped her grab the pillbox hiding in there.

She took one out, and put it up against the cat's mouth. The cat staggered a bit, but then opened their mouth, and swallowed the pill. She then pet the cat gently.

"So, how's the day been?"

"Humans come up to the edges, but nothing major.", said the tree, "Most are pretty afraid."

"Thank you, but, how's your day been?"

"I'm always anxious, since everything that followed that day. But, it's been calm today. Thank you for helping."

"Everyone deserves a safe place."

"So, big soup, today?'

"Oh, ye, I should get on making that. Otherwise Caul might explode."

"Someone also left an offering at the northern hut."

"Thank you. I'll check on it, later. I hope you have a calm rest of your day."

"You'll hear from me, if it isn't."

She moved the cat, stood up, and started on her way to the kitchen. At the door, she wiped her feet, and with a flick of her finger, got all of the dirt to fling back into the garden.

It was a bit of a longer way, to the kitchen, but the walk did her good. She was glad, that things were calm around here. She was curious, what brought the villagers to contact her, again. She tended to be a last option, and by choice.

At the kitchen, she let the vegetables climb out and up the counter, taking her own things out of Caul, and clicking a button, on a large machine in the corner. It dispensed large blocks of ice. She took two of them, and put them in Caul, who was already seating itself on top of the heat plate.

"Fire 8.'

It took no magic, but the plate under Caul started glowing in a familiar reddish colour. The ice cubes began to slowly dissolve.

She suspected, that the machine might have been broken in some way, by the day that magic crashed. She wasn't sure how,

though. She just couldn't imagine anyone needing blocks of ice this large, in a kitchen no less.

In the meantime, the vegetables were working on peeling and dicing themselves.

Soon enough, the water in Caul started boiling, and the veggies were ready to throw themselves in. She took one of the really big spoons, that were sitting on the counter, and started stirring, while the veggies jumped in, with glee. Tiny laughter was heard, and she could feel the magic evaporating from the vegetables, in Caul, and flowing back in the direction of the garden.

She took out some spices, that were in the cupboards around, and added them to the soup. The room was already filling with the smells of stock, of a hearty dinner.

She stirred some more, lost in thought, with Caul purring under her.

Caul and her were going up the stairs of the tower. It was the part of the building that was hit the most by the crash. There were some parts that were crumbled. Some places, where space was just not flowing right.

It mostly messed with her sense of balance, when she was sensing that she was walking on angled surfaces, while the actual walk went straight.

The reason why they were using the tower at all, was, because the top was mostly destroyed, to where Morty could have a sheltered place to sleep, that she could easily move in and out of. She made herself a nest there.

When they finally made it to the top, Morty was currently cleaning out her feathers. She was a giant crow, standing on one leg, and when she noticed the soup, she gobbled up her portion happily.

They sat around together, for a while, while Morty continued preening. She looked out the gaping hole in the walls, towards the sun, as it was slowly traveling over the forest, the warm rays lighting up her face.

## The Curse

The sun was beaming straight down, but the winds of travel were giving her a nice cool. She had to hold fast to her hat, to not lose it, but she was used to it, by now. Under her, Caul was running, jumping and floating from tree to tree, making short work of the treacherous terrain that they were traversing. Theoretically, it could have just floated the whole way, but she assumed it was a lot more fun for it, this way.

She heard some frogs croak, heard some birds chirp and insects buzz, but at this speed, it was hard to take in the surroundings. She did enjoy seeing the forest from above. Seeing the land, as a whole. The green sea under her, with some brown and grey bits of swamp poking through. Today, it seemed calm. As calm as anything could seem, at the speed she was moving past it.

The hut was slightly outside of the swamp. It was slightly run down, since she barely ever used it herself. She had a couple of them, laid out around the land, and they were mostly there, for people to be able to call her, if they needed help. If they needed a witch. They usually had to be very desperate, to call for her, and she didn't want to deprive people in that situation, from a way of contact.

It was illegal. Well, technically, it wasn't directly illegal, to call her. But magic in general was outlawed, and anything magic related tended to be destroyed or killed. The swamp was just too dangerous and too far away, for anyone to order the guilds to get rid of them. The last time they tried, they lost many people, and obviously, the swamp is still here

Either way, people didn't tend to call her for trifles, since there might be a death sentence involved, if the wrong person found out.

They reached the hut, and she started out by lighting the hearth. Caul placed itself in the fire, and began purring gently. She conjured some water into it, and looked around the place. She found some tea leaves in one of the many jars lining the shelves, and threw them in. She found another, with a bit of honey, and added that, too. Then she asked Caul to turn into a kettle. It groaned slightly, but the metal soon started shifting.

The chimney smoke should be enough, for someone to arrive here soon. The kettle started roaring, and she poured herself

a mug of tea, then lit a candle on the table, and placed Caul over it, to keep the tea warm for her guests. It started purring, again.

It took about an hour, before she heard a knock at the door. It was a pair of adults, with their child.

"We need your help, witch. We will pay any price," said

"What is wrong with the boy?"

The man staggered for a second, then responded, "Our daughter is cursed. We do not know how to undo this, and we cannot go to any church with this. She has been unable to do most basic tasks, oft not getting out of bed to even eat food we provide for her. She's been behaving weirdly, and thinking of herself as a boy. We are sure it must be some forbidden magic, that has caused her to be so, cast on her by some neighbour, jealous of her femininity. If this continues, she shall surely be found out and killed, to contain the curse. We cannot let that happen."

"Give me a moment, with your daughter, then. It will involve magic, so it's best you stay out of it, for now."

She reached out a hand towards the child, and the parents, after a moment of hesitation, nudged them to follow the her.

They both entered the hut, and she whirled her finger, making a bubble of air around the hut. Then she sat down at one side of the tea table, and gestured at the other seat, towards the child. After they sat down, she offered some tea, and looked at this daughter thoroughly.

First and foremost, she could not feel any magic, nefarious or otherwise around this person. She saw a pretty tomboy, an older teenager, and a deeply sad person. A husk of a person, unable to find what they need in this world.

"So, no one can hear us right now, and you can speak freely, if you want to. The good news is, you aren't cursed."

The person's eyes lit up.

"The bad news is, the feelings won't stop. They're not magical in nature. You feel like things are wrong, and, that's because things are wrong. But, it has nothing to do with curses, or magic, or anything that could be just easily fixed like that. Dispelled."

The child's whole body dropped slightly, and curled up.

"And what's worse, what you're going through, might kill you, in many ways. One way being, if you continue doing nothing. You won't feel better. Slowly, you might start losing hope. And a person without hope is not a person for this world, for long."

She started seeing a tear, in their eyes.

"And the second being, even though it isn't magic, it will still be considered that, by the churches. You are not safe from them. They will try to destroy you, to contain that 'curse'."

"What the fuck can I do, then?" cried the child.

"You can ask for help. It comes at a price, however."

They looked at each other, while the tears were still flowing down the person's face.

"Who are you? Are you a girl? Are you a boy? ARe you something entirely else?"

The person seemed confused at that sentence.

"Of course I'm a girl! I've always been a girl! I got cursed by these unnatural thoughts!"

"Ok, the I shall treat you as such. But know, that you are certainly not cursed. That nothing that's happening to you is unnatural. It's as old as humanity itself."

"I offer you protection, girl. I offer you help with avoiding your death. But, you are a magical creature now. You are something others will want to hunt and kill. My protection would mean, you cannot live with your family, with your friends. I cannot protect you from afar. And I cannot live among them. Neither of us can, if we want to live."

The girl started crying even harder.

"I don't expect certainty of you. You can change your mind, at some point. You can try to live the way you have lived, and see if it works for you after all. You can come with me, and figure out if that's ok with you, and if it isn't, return home, forget about it, and live your life out among family and friends."

"Lastly, I just want to say, that what you're dealing with, is not impossible to do something about. If I'm right about what you're dealing with. There are ways to help, against the feeling of not being a boy."

"You horrible temptress!" -She screamed through her tears."You vile witch! I shall break this curse by myself, if I

have to, but I will not believe any word of what you said. No one is out to get me, and the thoughts will pass. Maybe you're the one sending them to me, yourself!"

She stormed out of the hut, leaving her unfinished tea, and popping the air-bubble. She found her parents, sitting on the grass, not far away.

"That witch will not help us or me in any way. She is a charlatan. I will break the curse myself, if I have to. Let's leave this unholy place, as fast as we can."

And so, the witch looked on, as they left towards the road, towards their village. She wished that girl well. She hoped, for her sake, that she figured things out for herself. She poured the rest of the tea out into the fireplace, and rinsed Caul out. Then, getting Caul to be his regular form again, she stepped in, and started the ride back into the swamp.

When they reached back home, she went to the library, and looked for a very specific book. It's been a while since she did some potion brewing anew, but she knew she had the recipe she was looking for, somewhere in there. When she finally found the book she was looking for, a white tome, full of chemical knowledge, she took it over to the laboratory she had, and started reading through.

It took a while, but by the evening, the bubbling of flasks and hissing of burners could be heard from the lab.