

The Rowan and The Birch



Oh, but listener, the path of true love never runs smoothly, especially when your mothers-in-law are super-powerful witches.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Twit-twoo. So, listen carefully and I will continue with part twit-twoo, and tell you the story of the rowan and birch.

Now, the young couple's time was taken up with preparing the family home for the wedding, or rather trying to plan the wedding they wanted without interference from their mothers. Charisma made a miraculous recovery as soon as Bea came home, and she and Griselle often spent many hours discussing – well, bickering – about the type of flowers, who should make the cake, make the dress and who should and shouldn't be invited. It was also harvest time, so the couple were glad of the distractions and spent from dawn to dusk out in the fields avoiding them both.

It wasn't until three months later they were finally free to go for a walk in their beloved Cromers Wood and visit their Will You Marry Me Tree. Bea was teasing Barnaby, telling him he

needed to spend some time leaning against the other side of the tree to straighten it when she gasped.

'What is it Bea?' asked Barnaby.

She pointed above his head.

Barnaby turned and gasped too; some kind of frenzied beast had scratched out the YES to the marriage proposal and drawn a crack through the heart. And in huge letters was a large N and O.

'It is her. The circus witch,' said Bea, spinning around in a panic as if she was hiding in the trees.

'It is just someone jealous of our happiness, or one of my siblings messing around. Wait until I get my hands on them...,' said Barnaby.

'No, Barnaby, it is her!'



Illustration by Meg Metcalf

'How would she ever find you?'

'The same way you found me with grandma's broomstick. I'm so stupid. I told her all about Charisma and Griselle...and you.'

'But why would she come here when she knows of Charisma's powers.'

'Because she promised my hand to an old conjurer. If you hadn't come when you did, I would be married to him. She was so kind to me when I found her, saying how she'd grieved for me, nearly died of a broken heart. She even showed me what happened in her crystal ball. How when I was six months old, asleep in the most beautiful crib covered in white lace and silk, Charisma came in and stole me. She told me Charisma and her were old enemies and how no-one would ever want a child with her and how Charisma, bitter with envy, killed her husband, my father, so she would never have another child as beautiful as I. Oh, Barnaby, I'm such a fool.'

Bea threw her arms around Barnaby, sobbing.

'I promise she won't come near Charisma and Griselle. They are too strong for her.'

'She may be stronger, Barnaby. You don't understand. The conjurer gave her an eighth of his magic to secure my hand, another eighth was to be forthcoming once we were married. Nothing will stop her getting what she is owed.'

'But you are strong too, Bea. I've seen you! Mother said you'll probably surpass Charisma's power when you turn 24.'

'You don't understand. She stole my powers,' said Bea, pulling down the top of her dress to show a fresh pink scar running across her collarbone. 'I was stupid to think she'd ever leave me in peace and let me marry you.'

'I will marry you whatever happens. She will have to kill me,' said Barnaby, gently tracing the scar with his finger.

'Then we will both die,' whispered Bea.

To anyone outside the family circle, the wedding plans went ahead happily and without much fuss. However, tensions ran high once Bea and Barnaby told of the hateful witch defacing the beech tree.

Charisma wanted instant revenge, swearing she'd hunt her down and kill her, while Griselle pleaded for caution, telling her sister it was better that the powerful witch thought them so weak they could only use rowan berries against her. One or two berries alone would do nothing against her, but in larger numbers they were highly poisonous and a powerful irritant to especially mean witches, causing bouts of sneezing and vomiting if they got within several yards of the circle.

'It is best this way and then we can lure her in with a fake wedding. We will tell everyone we know about the time, date and location of the fake wedding and trick her into coming to the wood and then we can destroy her,' explained Griselle.

So over the next few days, everyone – except Charisma who kept sneezing - visited Cromers Wood and collected all the rowan berries they could from the trees and created a protective circle around the house and farmyard. Madame Du Boeuf had indeed heard of the magnificent wedding and decided to fly over the farm to see how the preparations were coming along. She liked nothing better than to destroy someone's happiness and nothing could give her greater pleasure than knowing it would be her own daughter's wedding she would be ruining. She was so lost in her horrible thoughts that she didn't notice the circle of rowan berries until it was too late. Overwhelmed by a huge sneezing fit, she crashed, hanging upside down in the very tree she'd defaced a few months before. Two red squirrels, fed up with her horrible screechy sneezing, eventually freed her by biting through her cape.

'If rowan berries are the best they can do, then I have nothing to worry about,' she said, cackling to herself as she got back on her broomstick.

The day of the fake wedding came. All the animals of the wood came out of their nests and hiding places, even the nocturnal creatures woke in the day, especially to see the spectacle of Bea and Barnaby marrying. After witnessing their courtship, they were fond of the young couple, and were unaware of the danger lurking above them as the circus witch swooped down onto the beech tree before turning herself into a squirrel and scampering down the branches until she was above the sweethearts. She had it all planned and rubbed her little squirrel paws together in glee as she watched the couple walk through the bluebells hand in hand, followed by Griselle and Charisma. She'd swoop down, kill the lovesick puppy of a boy and his feeble mother, and thieving Charisma, pick up the girl and deliver her to the old conjurer.

He'd offered to help but she couldn't stand his foul breath and body odour anywhere near her. She had, in the past, made subtle hints about bathing, even casting personal hygiene spells, but nothing worked. In the end, she decided it was just a by-product of his wickedness. The more evil the plan, the smellier he grew and right now, he absolutely stank to such an extent her cat Dogdeath had temporarily left home. No, she'd have to do this alone. And once they were married and he'd transferred the powers over to her, she'd kill him. She'd missed the girl being around the house, cooking and cleaning for her and had already magicked a nice new shiny pair of leg irons. Who could accuse her of not wanting the very best for her daughter?

While Madame Du Boeuf was lost in her own evil thoughts, Barnaby and Bea stood facing one another, desperately trying to resist the urge to look for the witch who they could sense was very close.

As the sweethearts exchanged their vows, the witch had to clamp her hand over her mouth to stop a spiteful hiss escaping.

'I can feel her nearby,' Bea whispered into Barnaby's ear, as they wrapped their arms around each other.

'She is above,' he whispered back and glanced at his mother to let her know.

Griselle nodded and walked towards them with a yellow ribbon and bound their wrists together before Charisma beckoned for them to jump three broomsticks laid side by side, belonging to her, Griselle and their own mother.

Now unbeknown to the circus witch, she'd transformed herself into a squirrel with a most uncanny resemblance to one of the most unpopular squirrels ever to have lived in Cromers Wood. Said squirrel was a dirty rotten thief who had been hounded out of the woods only the week before, by all the creatures, for stealing other squirrels' food and eating baby birds. Madame Du Boeuf was so intent in watching the two sweethearts, she hadn't noticed all the squirrels of the woods sneaking through the branches, the blackbirds, crows and robins landing quietly, even some snails had made an effort and slithered up for revenge and when she glanced up, she was surrounded. One large red squirrel who'd nearly starved to death, thanks to her doppelganger, didn't hesitate in sinking his teeth into the witch and before she could stop herself, she fell, transforming back into her hideous self and knocking poor Barnaby off his feet.

While Griselle grabbed her mother's broom, Charisma picked hers up and disappeared the sweethearts to safety in the tree's highest bow. In the meantime, Griselle used her mother's powerful broom to turn every single sapling in Cromers Wood into the figures of Bea and Barnaby. The circus witch spun round and round in confusion at all the sweethearts, their arms wrapped around each other and their laughter filling the forest. Growling, she turned each and every one back into two blackened stumps and every time she did so, Griselle turned them back into figures of Bea and Barnaby.

The circus witch sniffed the air with her long nose.

'I am done playing your pathetic games. You cannot fool me, with your rubbish magic. I smell my own blood nearby,' she said, looking up at the Will You Marry Me tree. 'Bea, my beautiful daughter! Your husband is waiting for you!' she sang in her horrible screechy voice. 'Come to mummy!'

Bea couldn't stop herself.

'I am not your daughter! And I am already married.'

The circus witch's cackle exploded across the wood, sending the birds and animals fleeing for their lives once again.

'Your marriage means nothing, child. You cannot escape me. I am too powerful.'

She threw one arm in the air and an almighty wind blew through the Will You Marry Me tree, stripping its leaves and twigs which came raining down on Griselle and Charisma who were frozen to the spot.

'There you are my lovelies,' said the circus witch looking up at Bea and Barnaby holding onto one another. 'What a pretty couple you make but alas, it will not last.'

A crystal ball suddenly appeared in front of her and floated up towards Bea and Barnaby, showing an image of an ugly old man putting on a silky black suit, his features as twisted in hate

and bitterness as the circus witch's.

'Ah bless, doesn't he look handsome! He is so looking forward to marrying you.'

'Mumma,' pleaded Bea.

'Yes, my darling,' said Madame Du Boeuf.

'You are NOT my mother!'

'Oh, you're going to break my heart,' said the circus witch as Bea felt herself being pulled down by an invisible force.

'Leave her alone!' shouted Barnaby who clung onto Bea with all his strength.

'Oh, please,' said the circus witch. 'Do you have to make this so difficult? Hocus pocus! I need to focus because she's going to be the star of my circus!'

A flash of white smoke brought both Bea and Barnaby to the ground.

'Please,' begged Bea.

'Oh, go on then. You've appealed to my better nature, my darling daughter. We'll let him stay, for a while. He'll make Dogdeath a most excellent little companion slash snack. Ha, ha!'

And with another puff of white smoke, poor Barnaby turned into a beautiful dormouse.

Bea bent down and quickly picked up Barnaby before her vile mother could do any more damage and gently placed him into her pocket. She felt such a rage building inside and, most remarkably, her collar bone started tingling like it used to when she had her powers. She watched the hateful witch talking to the vile conjurer in her crystal ball, as he complained about his suit chafing his many warts. The tingling was getting stronger as if the anger was reigniting her special powers. She had nothing to lose and stood, thrusting her hands towards her mother and Griselle, who suddenly awoke from their spell.

Madam Du Boeuf, pre-occupied with telling the conjurer how handsome he looked, suddenly noticed Griselle and Charimsa grabbing their broomsticks, and with one hand raised, snapping them in two. She then turned back to the conjurer who asked which aftershave she preferred.

They glanced down at their mother's old broomstick. It still had the bracket attached to it from where it had in turn been attached to a wall and part of a brick that refused to come away.

'Where's Barnaby?' panicked Griselle.

Bea put her hand in her pocket and held the dormouse out to her.

'How dare she!' said Griselle, flashing as purple as her sister used to as a child.

Griselle picked up her mother's broomstick and mustered all her anger, throwing the circus witch to the floor and then, something very strange happened. Leaves froze in mid-fall, birds in mid-flight, squirrels in mid-leap, the circus witch mid-scream. Griselle, Bea and Charisma looked around in wonder.

'It works! Mother's broomstick! Look, your anger made the brick and bracket come off!' said Charisma, pointing at a pile of brick dust and metal.

'But we only have three minutes and three seconds,' said Giselle.

'We have to kill her,' said Bea.

'But as soon as we try, the spell will break. She's too quick and strong for us.'

'At least we could try,' said Bea desperately. 'She will never leave us alone.'

'There's only one thing we can do,' said Charisma, whispering something to her sister, who grabbed her hand.

'There must be another way?' pleaded Giselle.

Charisma shook her head.

'But sister, my dear sister,' cried Giselle, tears pooling.

'What is it?' asked Bea.

'Come to me, my beautiful daughter,' said Charisma, taking Bea in her arms.

'Mother this is the not the time for you to start getting all touchy-feely, and careful of Barnaby. You'll crush him!'

'He will be fine, you'll see. Giselle is an old hand at undoing spells to turn people into animals. Aren't you?'

Giselle nodded, wiping her tears away.

'I love you with all my heart my beautiful daughter. You have brought me such happiness and you and Barnaby will be so happy together. And my sister. Well what can I say but I love you dearly. I know you will take care of her.'

'Mumma?' said Bea. 'What's happening? What are you going to do?'

'It's time,' she said and nodded at Giselle.

'Are you sure, dear sister?'

'There is no other way.'

'Mumma? Aunt? What...'

Bea got her answer soon enough. There was a strong crackling and a burning smell and Charisma threw herself on top of the circus witch, while Giselle held her mother's broom firmly over them. Charisma smiled at her sister and daughter for the very last time, her first and last tear rolling down her cheek.

'Mumma!' screamed Bea as she watched the two witches transform into a tree. Though as she looked closer, she could see it wasn't one tree but two; a rowan and a birch tree wrapped around each other in mortal combat.

Of course, it was a desperately sad time. It could be said that Bea had lost both of her mothers, though of course, she only grieved for one. Giselle sought the expertise of the top witches up and down the land, offering a handsome reward to bring her dear sister back to life but to keep the vile circus witch as a birch tree. None, however, could perform such a spell because their branches were so entwined. It would be too dangerous they counselled; if you

brought one back alive then the other would live too. The circus witch would torment them forever. So both Bea and Griselle grieved for Charisma, visiting the tree often to thank her for sacrificing her life so her daughter could be free.

Twit-twoo.

Oh, and Barnaby? How could I forget! Well, let's just say it took Griselle, her magic much reduced by the battle with Madame Du Boeuf, some 25 attempts over two months to transform Barnaby back to human form. And in that time, he'd had close encounters with several stray cats (Griselle and Bea's cats were under strict instructions not to harm a single hair of any dormouse on pain of death), a family of very unpleasant weasels, a visiting seagull and a ferret, all of which he refused to talk about.

And did they live happily ever after? Well, of course they did, though they first had to deal with the very smelly conjurer...but my friends, twit-twoo, that is another story for another time.

Twit-twoo.

The End

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**HAND OF DOOM
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