

Eva and the Forest Spirit

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Eva. She lived on a farm with her mother and father on the edge of a big dark forest. One winter when Eva was still very young, her mother fell ill and died. Eva and her father Henri were overcome with grief so the following spring Henri decided they would leave the farm behind and move into the forest. There, he could make a living cutting down trees for lumber. At first Eva was very unhappy. She was afraid of living in the forest. She was scared of how dark it was at night and of the noises and glowing eyes of strange creatures. She refused to go out and play in the forest and she missed her mother terribly.

Soon after Eva and Henri moved to the forest, they were visited by a strange woman. She said she was known as Witch Sorrel and was wise in medicine and magic. She told them that they should seek her out, should they ever fall ill or get into trouble in the forest. Witch Sorrel also noticed how sad Eva looked and told her she would bring her something to cheer her up. In a few weeks the witch returned with a tiny fox pup. She told Eva the pup's mother had been killed by trappers so the pup needed someone to care for him. Eva was delighted with the fox pup and named him Catkin because of his long fluffy tail. She was soon so busy taking care of Catkin that she could no longer spend all her time missing her mother. As Catkin grew, he became curious about the outdoors and soon wanted to explore. So Eva was forced to overcome her fear and take him out into the forest. There were so many new things to see and places to explore that Eva could not be scared for long. Eva and Catkin soon became inseparable companions wandering the forest together and delighting in its wonders.

One day, in the second spring after Eva and Henri came to the forest, Henri did not come home from his work cutting trees all day. He was not back for supper, so Eva and Catkin ate their supper without him. After Eva cleaned up the meal and washed the dishes and he still did not return, she and Catkin decided to set out into the forest to find him. The woods near Eva's house were now familiar to both of them and they soon arrived at the clearing where her father had been cutting down trees. It was deserted and Eva saw no trace of him. However, Catkin began pawing at a large clump of vines so Eva went over to see what he was doing. Catkin soon uncovered the handle of Henri's axe. Eva pulled it out with difficulty because it was tightly wrapped in vines. As she did so, she noticed that the vines were a type she had never seen before. The leaves had a beautiful swirling pattern on them and they were such a bright green color they almost seemed to glow. For a long moment Eva puzzled over the axe wrapped in vines but she thought of nothing that could explain it. Then she remembered Witch Sorrel telling her and her father to find her if they should ever get in trouble in the forest. That's where I have to go she thought. Surely Witch Sorrel will know what to do. Eva used her belt to sling the axe on her back. Having a weapon could be useful when travelling deeper into the forest she thought. Then she pulled up a wad of the strange vines and put it in her waist pouch to show to the witch.

Eva had a vague notion of where Witch Sorrel lived, though she had never been there by herself as it was rather far. However she set out, leading Catkin in the direction she remembered.

They had not gone far when the sun began to set and it was soon getting dark. Just when Eva was thinking they might be lost, Catkin's ears pricked up and he stood still. Eva stopped and listened too but she heard nothing. After a while she heard something too. Big heavy footfalls on the forest floor. And just then a great big horned giant walked into a clearing in the trees right in front of them! The giant was half naked and carried a knife that was bigger than Eva was tall. Eva tried not to shriek as she grabbed Catkin and ducked down behind a tree. The giant must have heard them because he suddenly stopped and turned his head. Then quick as lightning, he reached down and plucked Eva and Catkin up from behind the tree with one hand. "DON'T EAT US!" Eva cried out as she and Catkin rapidly approached the giant's face.

"Why not?" said the giant. "Do you have anything better you can offer me than your tender flesh? Admittedly you don't have very much of it so I'm open to other offers..."

Eva pulled her father's axe off her back and held it up. "Please Mr giant, take this axe instead. It's well crafted and sharp and has felled many trees."

"Useless!" said the giant "I could barely trim my nails with such a little blade! Do you have anything else?"

Eva thought in a panic. What else did she have? Not much except... the vines to show to Witch Sorrel. In desperation, she pulled them out of her pouch and held them up. The giant's eyes went very wide.

"Now that's a good offer! Are you sure you want to give those up?"

"You mean you'll take the vines instead of eating us?" said Eva shocked.

"Yes said the giant. These will be far tastier than you or the fox. They are called glow-vines and they are a rare delicacy. Haven't gotten my hands on them in years! Come with me and I'll show you how to cook them."

After a moment's pause in which Eva tried to wrap her head around what was going on, she managed to stammer, "but you were going to eat us!"

"Not really" replied the giant. "I could smell those vines on you. I figured I might scare you into giving up some of them. Now come, join me at my fire and we can enjoy the glow-vines together."

It was fully dark now. Eva didn't think she could outrun a giant anyway if it came to that so she nervously agreed. The giant, who told them his name was Izod, placed Eva and Catkin gently on his shoulder and strode off. They soon arrived at a clearing with a huge fire pit surrounded by massive tree trunks which Eva soon saw were giant sized seats. Izod set Eva and Catkin down on one of the logs and began to build a fire. When the fire was blazing, he built a spit and hung a huge cauldron from it which he filled with water from a nearby stream. When the water began to bubble he added the vines. Eva leaned forward to see what would happen next. After a little while the vines began to really glow. Then the glow spread from the vines and into the water until the whole pot radiated a warm green light. Izod served Eva some of the glow-vine soup in the smallest cup he could find which was still enormous. The soup was beautiful but Eva was still unsure. "You go first." she told Izod and he happily agreed, drinking a big mouthful with satisfaction. Eva took a tiny sip. It was sweet and fresh like the taste of spring flowers and a delicious warmth spread from her lips to her entire body as she sipped it. Izod was right, this is a delicacy she marveled as she gave Catkin a taste.

While they enjoyed the glow vine soup, Eva told Izod of her father's disappearance and her urgent need to find Witch Sorrel for help. Izod told her that he knew where Witch Sorrel's cottage was. He suggested that she and Catkin spend the night at his camp and in the morning he would take them there. Eva agreed. So, filled with warm glow vine soup, Eva and Catkin curled up by the fire. Catkin went straight to sleep but Eva lay awake for a long time puzzling over everything that had happened. Finally she drifted off.

Eva was awakened in the morning by bright sunlight filtering into the camp. Izod and Catkin were already awake and they were soon off, riding on Izod's shoulder through the tree tops. Though it didn't take long at Izod's giant stride, Eva could tell they had travelled a long way. She realized she had been foolish to set off so late the day before. Izod let them off a little way from the witch's cottage which Eva was glad of since she wasn't sure what Witch Sorrel's reaction would be to her riding on the shoulder of a giant. Eva and Catkin walked into a large clearing. Witch Sorrel's cottage sat in the middle among well tended vegetable and flower gardens. With thick stone walls and glass windows, it was far nicer than the dirt floor cabin that Eva and Henri shared. Eva walked through the garden to the door with Catkin following closely behind and knocked on the door with a large metal knocker shaped like a magpie. The door soon swung open and there was Witch Sorrel.

"Why Eva and and Catkin! How wonderful to see you!" the witch said smiling. "Did you come all the way here alone? Please come inside. Have you had any breakfast?"

"It's just us, and breakfast would be wonderful," replied Eva eagerly as her stomach was beginning to rumble. "Then come sit down and you can tell me what brings you all this ways without your father." replied the witch.

Witch Sorrel seated Eva at a little table by an open window and got out bread and honey and fruit and began brewing tea. While Eva ate and fed Catkin scraps of bread, she told Sorrel everything that had happened. The witch listened attentively and when she was done she said nothing for a little while. Then she said, "I warned your father this could happen. That the forest would not take kindly to him cutting down its trees."

"What do you mean?" asked Eva.

"I've heard of the vines you described." said the witch. "They are a sign of beings in the forest who possess magic far greater than mine. Greatest among these are the forest guardians. The fact that you found these vines growing over your father's axe must mean that the forest guardians have taken your father away to stop him from cutting down any more of the forest."

"So how can I get him back?" asked Eva alarmed.

Luckily for you and you father, I have met some of these guardians before and they gave me a token of friendship." The witch gestured to an intricately carved bell that hung around her neck. "I met some of these forest guardians long ago. They gave me this bell and told me, if ever I was in need of their help, I should go to the ring of standing stones in the center of the forest and ring it when the last rays of the setting sun hit the stones. That is what you must do now. When you meet them, you can ask for your father back. I do not know what they will say or what they might ask for in exchange, but as long as you have the bell, they will know that you are a friend. That is the best I can do for you. As I said, their powers are far beyond what I possess."

“Oh Miss Sorrel,” replied Eva. “I knew you would know what to do! Thanks you so, so much! I am not afraid to meet these guardians and I will be perfectly safe with Catkin by my side!”

Witch Sorrel sent Eva and Catkin off on their quest with with the bell and directions to the standing stones as well as two sandwiches, some dried plums and a water skin. “You should have enough time to get there” Witch Sorrel told them “but don’t dally or you will miss the sunset and have to stay till the next night.”

Eva and Catkin walked all day only taking short breaks. They followed a path that the witch showed them until it ended at the bank of a stream. Eva ate her sandwich sitting on a rock while Catkin played in the water. Afterwards they forded the stream and continued across country. Then the land slowly began to rise. Soon the trees began to thin out, and they came to another path that steadily went up and up. As the sun began to dip down, Eva and Catkin came out of the trees onto a great wide open expanse of meadow. They could see the forest laid out around them in all directions and in front of them was a ring of very tall ancient looking stones with strange swirling patterns carved into them. Eva noticed the patterns were quite similar to those on the glow-vines. It was very quiet as Eva and Catkin waded through the tall grass to the middle of the ring of stones. The sun still shone on the stones, casting long shadows but the rest of the forest below was dark now. A breeze rustled though the grass and Eva shivered. Catkins ears were alert listening. They waited there watching the shadows swallow up everything until finally only the tallest stone was still lit by the sun.

Eva rang the bell. It was not loud but its peel was clear and sweet. Catkin’s fur stood straight up. At first Eva saw nothing. Then just as the last rays of sun disappeared, several shadowy figures appeared as if out of thin air gliding towards them from among the stones. Within moments five tall figures stood in a circle around the two of them. Eva could not see their faces or even tell if they were human because they were hidden by bronze masks and long cloaks covered their bodies. Then the figure standing in front of Eva, who appeared to be the leader, spoke. “You ring the bell of a friend in need, yet I do not know you. Who are you and why did you call for the guardians of the forest?”

Eva mustered her courage and looked up at the bronze mask. “I am Eva daughter of Henry and I summoned you because my father was abducted and I want him back!”

At this there was some murmuring among the figures in a language Eva didn’t recognize. Then the same figure said “We are but servants of the forest and we do what we must to protect it. However, you carry a bell that can only be held by a friend of the forest. So I must assume your intentions are pure. We will take you to see our master, the great forest spirit, and he will be the one to judge you. Now please stand back.” The leader of the guardians drew a staff from his cloak and touched the ground in front of the tallest stone. When he did so, the earth opened to form a round hole about ten feet in diameter with a stone spiral staircase winding downwards into darkness. Then he murmured some strange words and his staff began to glow. “Follow me” he said, and Eva and Catkin did so, following him into the hole with the other guardians following behind.

Deeper and deeper they went into the earth. Eva could see the outlines of giant roots and glistening wet stones in the walls of the hole, catching the light from the guardian's staff. It was hard to tell how long they descended but eventually they left the stairs behind and entered a stone corridor. Before long Eva could see a faint light at the end of the passage.

Eva, Catkin and the guardians came out of the end of the corridor into an enormous round room that, while deep underground was open to the sky. The moon was full and high in the sky already and its light shone down into the huge chamber. The floor was made of smooth flagstones and the walls had many stories of colonnades, arches and terraces spiraling upward toward the earth's surface. The walls, terraces and much of the floor was overgrown with plants and flowers of many kinds including the glow-vines as well as many other strange and exotic looking species. In the middle of the room, there was a ruined structure which had several tall columns remaining. Perched delicately on top of them was the largest and by far the strangest creature Eva had ever seen. The creature was at least twice the size of Izod if not more and was tall and thin and covered in thick shaggy fur. Its face was a bit like a goat and a bit like a man with antlers spouting from his forehead and big yellow eyes that shone in the moonlight.

"Why do you disturb me now when the moon is so beautiful?" the creature said. The forest spirit's voice was rich and deep and seemed very old as if the earth itself were speaking. "This girl is the daughter of the one we found destroying your trees. She summoned us by ringing one of our bells and she wishes to speak to you." said the guardian with the staff. "A bell, hmm? Come closer so I can see you better." said the forest spirit. The guardian with the staff gestured that Eva go forward, which she did, with Catkin following her as always. The forest spirit put out his hand and Eva and Catkin were raised up towards the great creature's face. Eva trembled as she looked down at the rapidly disappearing ground. But when she instead looked up at the forest spirit's huge yellow eyes, she was no less terrified. "You have come to me because my servants took your father away?" the forest spirit asked. "Yes" said Eva. "I want you to release him. He did nothing wrong!" "There, I'm afraid you are mistaken. He cut down many trees that were in the prime of life and which did not belong to him. If justice were to be served, he should die and his body fed to the trees that he cared not for in life." "Your awful!" cried Eva, tears of anger squeezing from her eyes. "How could you say such a horrible thing!" "Do not worry child" said the creature. "I am not a being of cold justice, I am a guardian and I care for all life. Your father is safe. I have him here where he cannot do anymore harm." The creature gestured to the guardians standing below, and in a moment, two of them left and returned with Eva's father. He looked up at Eva with shock on his face but if he said anything to her, she was too high up to hear. She could see that he was not bound and looked well enough as far as she could see in the dim moonlight. So she returned her attention to the forest spirit. "You don't understand" she said. "My father cuts down trees so he can sell the lumber to make a living. He sold our farm, so without the money from the timber we would both starve." The creature didn't answer but he seemed to look more closely at her. Then he said "I understand. You came to my forest to take refuge which my forest provides. However, if you are

going to live here, you must live in harmony with the forest and not be its enemy. The bell that was given to you is a work of powerful magic. Anyone whom the bell deems to have evil intentions cannot hold it. Yet you carried and rang it with no difficulty. Therefore, I believe you already have love for my forest in your heart. So I will make you a deal.” With the hand not holding Eva and Catkin, the forest spirit reached down to the ground and plucked up one of the many strange plants. It was a tiny sapling with white flowers. “This is an apple tree” he said as he held it up for Eva to see. “It can grow delicious fruit that you may eat and sell. Plant this and grow an orchard. Then, you and your father can make a living by growing trees instead of cutting them down.” Eva’s eyes filled with tears. “Oh thank you Mr Forest Spirit! I really do love your forest very much and I don’t want to cause it any harm and neither does my father! We just didn’t know.” Eva took the sapling and held it gently supporting its roots. As the forest spirit lowered Eva and Catkin back to the ground and to Eva’s waiting father, he said “I’m glad you came here child. You understand the forest better now and I understand you better as well.” Eva looked up at the forest spirit’s big yellow eyes and smiled. Then she ran to her father who swept her up in a big hug. “I’m so proud of you he whispered.” Then he picked up Catkin as well who licked his face, overjoyed.

The guardians led the three of them back to the surface. They were all very tired so they spent the rest of the night under the stars sleeping in the protective circle of the standing stones. In the morning, they made the long journey back home. Eva’s father put the apple sapling in a pot to grow bigger before they planted it in the clearing where he had cut down the trees. When it grew even bigger, they grafted cuttings from it to grow more trees just like the first one, and in a few years they had a beautiful apple orchard. The apples they grew were so sweet that they became famous throughout the region and people came from miles around to try them. Eva’s father made a far better living from the apple trees than he ever could have done by cutting timber. But what was more important to Eva and Henri, was the joy of caring for the trees and the knowledge that they were living in harmony with the forest that they both loved.