

# PEACOCK EYES

by

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My name is Shallon.

There is a story to be told; to be heard and written down and of late I find myself more disinclined to human things, so must tell before I forget what it is to be human.

And before anyone cry out in disbelief, "Nay! She cannot be human!" accept what word is mine to give. Before this place was known as the Waste, before the founding of Quayth, before Flame and spirit-kindling called me to Power, I was human. My name is Shallon. What other names I had when I lived with my husband and daughter, I have forgotten.

We lived in the village of Needle's Eye which was on the New Road to the Gate. The ruined road you now call Old.

The change began the day my daughter, Felika, came to me with a raven feather knotted in her hair and red shining in the depths of her eyes. This I saw as I wheeled from the table, floured to my elbows from the baking. Her voice, coming from behind me, was strained, with a note of forced laughter and enjoyment in it. She stood, berry-basket clutched in one limp hand, clothing torn and soiled. "Mother," she said to me. "Did you know that ravens rule the battlefield?" She smiled; a death's-head rictus painted on a face as white as bone. Her movements were stiff and

controlled, like a stringed puppet. She had bitten her lip till the blood flowed and a bead trailed on her chin.

I took her in my arms, but she stood stone hard in the circle of them. "Child, what ails you? Battlefields? Who has been filling your head with such things?" She smiled at me, licked the drop of blood from her lip, and the feather in her hair stirred. I seized it, wresting it loose though she fought me and shrieked fit to bring Neevor, my husband, and Wold, my youngest brother, on the run. The foul thing stung my hand and when I flung it in the fire it writhed, clawing its own way free, to burn on the hearthstone; a shriveling spider. Then Felika threw herself into my arms and cried, babbling of ravens and evil and being trapped, and it hurt so . . . and her uncle.

My brother Tyrick had gone some six seasons ago. We were strangers in the village, having come out of Arvon, and I being eldest had settled the three of us, Tyrick, Wold, and myself, here.

He had objected to me leading and to all I did. We were always at odds, even then. He resented Neevor, who ran the small roadhouse in Needle's Eye, and my taking of the Cup and Flame in marriage to him. Tyrick hated the way the other folk never accepted us. He protested and grumbled and began to hate everything about this place; hate long in growing and deep.

For all that I had married one of their own I, as much as anyone, felt the eyes on my back and the ceasing of whispers when I joined the other women sewing or spinning. They feared me as a stranger, for all my quiet words and soft-spoken ways—I was careful of my tongue in those days—but they feared me more for my eyes.

My mother, before her change, had told me of a bird the first Dalesmen spoke of from beyond the Gate, a tropical bird with eyes of blue and green in its tail. A peacock, it was. In her tongue Shallon means "blue-green."

My eyes are brilliant blue all around the edges while the center shines gem green. In darkness, the line of black that

runs through them, like the buckle of a belt, shows wide. The villagers feared me for my strange eyes.

For some years we had lived in peace, hearing only rumors of the Powerful Ones, in Arvon; and Tyrick grew more bitter. We argued more and more often.

“You resent Power!” he shouted at me once. “You’re afraid of it and are content to act like one of these pitiful villagers, denying everything that could be yours! And you deny it to me!”

He would not hear me when I said that the Change takes time, that I was not blocking him in any way and that once he *could* decide, he was free to. My words were lost to him. He heard only my rejection and believed what his heart told him.

At last he could stand it no more and left, saying that since he was a stranger, then he would be a stranger in the place of his own choosing. From what I know, the place chose him.

It was one of the dark places where there has been so much spilling of blood, and pain, that the rocks are soaked with it; a place that has been in the Dark almost since the rock cooled from the world’s birthing. A place that awaited only the spirit and will of humankind to rouse it. This was where he awoke, when Tyrick came.

Then the one day Felika cried herself into hysterics, until we took her to Ishal who knew some heal-craft and put her to sleep. In her sleep the tears still ran.

The next day was when the ravens came. They came in a mass like summer thunderheads billowing in the sky, black and thick. They broke the branches of trees with their weight. Our chickens were picked apart as they ran. What cattle we had were blinded, eyes stolen and many of the ravens battered themselves dead against the shutters striving to reach us. There were always more of them.

Thus it was that Tyrick came back to us, astride a black thing that was like a horse, with fangs, a Kephan. His eyes had been the color of water glimpsed from the top of a

deep stone well, or sunlight on a raven's wing, black with a sheen of blue. Now they were red and as he slowly rode into the village the ravens fell silent behind him; flying attendance so close that one could not see where his black-feathered cloak ended and living wings began. On his shoulders rode two fleshless ravens that chuckled and whispered in his ears, the bones showing white against his hair.

He stopped before our door and called my daughter's name. She woke, starting up and made as if to stand. I held her and she fought me. Tears began again as she struggled silently—not by her will. I could not hold her. Wold caught her and I held Neevor by the elbow when he would have gone to the door. "No, love," I told him. "He's my brother. You, he would kill without a thought."

"But . . ."

"Please, Neevor. Let me try." So it was that I went to the door.

"Unto the house greeting," Tyrick said. "And fair fortune." I could hear the clack as the ravens on his shoulders fluttered skeleton wings.

"No, Tyrick. You bring no fortune with you. Get you gone."

"What, dear sister? Such a poor welcome for your estranged brother. I bring you very good fortune indeed. My lord commends himself to you." The mark on my hand, from the raven's feather, burned.

"Your lord? And to me?" I answered, "Tyrick, as my brother, please listen to me. Leave Felika alone, please." I pled with him then for I was weak in those years. I could feel the wood of the door at my back, smell the rot on the Kephan's breath as it moved closer. *Sweet Mother! He's near his choice. He wanted so to be accepted . . . if he chooses wrong . . . he will never unmake the decision, not wanting to . . . if he chooses wrong.*

"But . . ." for a moment his gaze faltered, his voice almost childlike. "I told him about you, Shallon, he wants you both, you and Felika. And I will have my revenge on *them*."

“Little brother.” Swallowing my fear I stepped away from the door, raising my hands to him. “Tyrick, come down from there, please. You frighten me, speaking from such a height.”

He made as if to get down, and paused. Only an instant did he hesitate, his eyes flickering from red to black. For a second I saw my little brother as he had been when he was frightened of the dark, afraid of nightmares. His face was twisted with terror and fascination and self-loathing; he reached to me—and one of the ravens hissed. He snatched his hands back into the cloak settling deeper into the saddle.

“No. You won’t fool me again.”

Then the ravens were on me. Black feathers, beaks, talons, carrion stench, and horror. As I went down I saw the hole torn in the thatch—my family burst from the door—the ravens; heard screams begin from the other houses and there was a bursting of black feathers in my head that dragged me into darkness.

What humans now call the Old Road leads straight on, into the Waste that the first-folk called Ravensmoore only a short time ago. Following the road to the gate, along the way into the hills, one will see the remains of trees fallen by the road; if trees grew of stone. Then, they were living still and that is where I awoke.

All I could remember was the wave of black engulfing Needle’s Eye. Neevor! And my family. I pried open my eyes to see only darkness, my hands and body fixed to a floor that crackled but did not let me go. If I pulled too hard, it was as if I tried tearing my own skin off, first a pulling, then sharp pain began.

I lay in the dark for some time, alone, thirsty, scratched, and aching. I do not know how long. Then a velvet-soft voice, that stroked along my skin, whispered in my ears. “My lady.”

“Who’s there?” I tried to see, tried to sit up, sank back with a gasp.

"Someone enamored of your lovely eyes, my dear." Soft and gentle, the voice tried to soothe me. Soft, yes. Gentle, yes—but . . . "Once cleaned up you will indeed be a beautiful wife," it said.

"I am wife to Neevor!" I retorted, then choked on a whimper. Before me in the dark hung a skull, shreds of flesh still on its red-smearred surface.

"Him?" the voice asked politely. "I don't think my ravens left much for you. Think on this a short time, my dear lady." Then I was alone again.

If this voice wished to frighten me, it had succeeded, but failed in one respect. For my husband's sake was I human. Our family has always been so. Power for us demands a choosing, a decision, and a heavy price. I had chosen to be woman with human weakness, human strength. To avenge the others, and my kin . . . I would, I would . . .

Tyrick had spoken truly when he hurled my fear at me, all those years ago. I was afraid of Power. My father had been human enough, and my mother had waited for his death before Changing. Still I was afraid. To Change, one chooses to die in part, making room for the new to be born.

With the choice of Power comes choice of wisdom; what to do with it, good or ill. Had I done nothing, my choice would have been for evil. I would have wed the Ravenlord and been in thrall to him, helpless all my life. In the depths of myself all Light would have lain forever trapped. I would choose again.

"Mother, of my spirit," I said. "Father, of my change." Within, I could feel the surge as long-closed passages were swept clear by the ancient words, the pain as threads of one kind of life began tearing away. "Flame, that lights the way. I choose again—" I closed my eyes, blocking tears, and bid my human self farewell.

"*What are you doing?*" The voice shrieked, no longer velvet but iron. "*Stop! I command it!*" Something reached in the dark and tried to close my throat with *its* will. I gasped the last words, forcing the alien sounds past a reluc-

tant tongue, denying that choking hold and my own fear of what I did.

“*Svochos—ENYAHG; I—choose—POWER!*”

I was blinded for a moment with the light pouring through me, streaming from within, shining as if I burned on a pyre of my own making. I smelled incense and camphor, pine and the sweetness of flowers on the hillside while the Flame and the Mother gave what I asked, taking their price. As my soul unfurled its wings, in the Flame's light, I could see her smile. I opened my eyes and could see in the darkness.

My body was being held in a nest, in a magpie's clutter. Shining bits of metal were woven in with bones and hair; dead twigs were wound around with heavy gold tassels torn from tapestry cloth. Broken swords and gems and bright flowers withering. It was an attempt to collect beauty, robbing all loveliness from what it touched.

My new Power burned still, painful. It was untried Power like a young fire and I used it to free myself from the nest grown into my flesh. I stood up brushing at the veils of blue-green light that drifted before me, hiding my enemy, the remains of the nest charring away in a drift of gray ash.

We stood in the midst of his nest, his kingdom. It was a clearing in a stand of trees that leaned toward one another as if for support. Brilliant, poisonous green leaves rustled as they scraped together in the breeze, like boneless fingers. I could not see the sky, only that green and the darkness under the trees, the nest a jumbled mat of sticks and twigs on the forest floor, with wicker walls knotted between the trees.

Before me stood the “Lord” with hand outstretched to stop me. He was bone and ash and tight-stretched skin. He was the Darkness under rocks where blind things grow. He was Death as the Destroyer rather than the Changer of Lives. He was the crippled part of every man's soul. A crest of blood-matted feathers rose on his otherwise naked skull, and there was hunger in his eyes.

“Killer, for the lives of my family,” I said and threw all of myself at him. I poured out all of the Light within me and it was not enough.

I held and held and held, draining my new Power, and when at last I looked up from my knees, my old form unable to channel my Power, he still stood.

“Very pretty, my lady, but you cannot harm me in that way. You are beautiful, my peacock eyes, and I will have you as well as everything else,” he said, walking toward me. I was trapped, netted like a bird in a snare. A bird staring at the snake.

“Shallon! No!” Neevor’s voice cut through the darkness around me, like his sword cutting the nest wall. He was there—how?—alive—the skull in the dark, a lie! He cut the opening in the nest wider and stood in the opening, his grandsire’s sword at the ready. He looked worn and very weary, as if he had searched for me a long time. He had always been stronger than Tyrick could ever see. “Shallon, I love you.”

That was all he said.

The Dark Lord screamed a raven’s croak and threw up his hand and my husband went down—NO—Neevor knelt behind the steel that was his protection. I could not stop to shield him, his sword *must* shield him . . . he had shown me how I was stronger than the Lord of Ravens, I would not waste the chance he had given me.

“He loves me,” I said and the Evil One stumbled back to avoid the touch I reached to him.

“He loves me. You love lies. Which is stronger?” I stepped again and yet again and still he fled me. All around the circle of the nest we went.

At last he stood at bay between two trees whose branches wove behind him and blocked his passage to one side or the other.

He turned bright-panicked eyes on me. “Woman! You love no one! What love you have is weak. You fear to love too hard.” For a moment I hesitated. “See, this one you rejected, denied.” He made a summoning gesture.



Between us, Tyrick stood. My brother faced me coldly, no liking in his face. "Tyrick?" I stammered, weakening.

"You denied me my right," he said. I looked into his face and began to believe them. I turned as a child does for reassurance to Neevor and saw the love shining in his eyes, despite my change already. No matter what I was, powerful or not, he loved me still.

Tyrick caught my hands and held me in that moment of hesitation, his "lord" abandoning him to flee through a small Gate. My brother cried out as he was left behind, then it was I who held him fast as he tried to free himself and follow. The ravens on his shoulders fell into patterns of bones on the forest floor and I held him close. He cried out again and shielded his eyes from me.

"Tyrick, listen! Listen! You are still my brother! Tyrick!" The Power that sustained this place was being sucked out of it as a man sucks dry an orange and my brother's struggles grew less. I felt more fear for him than of him at that moment, for it was less him listening to me than a draining away of all he was. Neevor put his hand on my shoulder, snatched it back with a muffled cry. "Tyrick." I called him and Neevor added his voice to mine.

"Yes," he answered me, lying in my hands like a babe, limp, the feathers on his cloak dragging across his face. Already he looked old and was growing weak as the Ravenlord leached his life.

"Tyrick, you choose. Your 'lord' drains you even as you fight for him. We still love you. Tyrick, please choose. With your own power you can still withstand him."

He glared out of an old man's face, eyes red still, then he shivered, looked up at me, and chose yet another way. In my hands he shuddered—and died. His eyes, black once more, stared up at the leaves overhead, free of all of us. The trees groaned.

Neevor pulled me free of Tyrick's body as the first branches started falling, gray stone shattering as the limbs hit on suddenly hard ground, all life pulled out of them.

One can still see the weathered stone branches, for stone wears slower than humankind.

So it was that I became not-human. The change was slow as bones shifted and my feathers itched, I recall, when they began to grow, blue and green like my eyes.

Neevor and I have pursued the Ravenlord across this land, for what my brother awoke, I must finish. We cannot allow him to leech life from this world. I and the Others who have made the decision, growing hourly in Power, have had to learn quickly what our ancestors learned in long years of study. We do not have him yet. Neevor, who is full human and has no Choice, is learning as well. He says that he will stay with me. I do not know. I love him still, in a strange, quiet way, for I do not feel as I once did.

We will defeat him, now or in the future. We have time. Felika chose for humankind, so long ago, and Wold—or Volt, as you now call him, has yet to make his Choice. We will contain him. So will I impress this tale into the stone, that any who have the spirit to hear, will someday hear and remember the Ravenlord— Despair.

I tire of this. Hush. Do you hear them?—stars singing—there, there is my name. I have no more time or memory for this. They call me. I am Shallon.

## Afterword

*The first thing that happened when I agreed to write a story in Witch World was that I went completely blank. After all, I've been reading everything set there as soon as I could get my little hands on it. What, I asked myself, could I possibly add? So I sat in front of my keyboard, stared at the screen, stared at the walls, stared at the peacock feathers on the walls . . . There is an old wive's tale that I heard from my*