



STYX

BY SIBLEY DALE
EDITED BY KRISTA ADAMS

You rip your arm free. His nails rake your skin. Blood throbs back into your fingers. You clutch torn fabric to your chest. Cold air bites the skin beneath.

The water hits your thighs—cold, thick, dragging at your legs. Your foot plunges into soft muck. The stench rises: rot, sulfur, something dead.

Behind you, the hounds erupt. Chain link rattles and sings. Your gut clenches.

Branches scrape your arms. Wet moss slaps your face. His laughter follows—unhurried, pleased. It echoes off the water and finds you.

You run. Your breath shreds. Your legs burn. You keep running.

Your back slams bark. You slide down, chest heaving. The air is sulfur and rot, so thick it coats your tongue, your throat, your lungs.

Heat crawls over your skin. Something moves on your neck. Legs. You slap it away. Your hand comes back black with swamp muck.

Sweat trickles down your face, between your breasts. It finds every cut and lights it up—a constellation of small fires on your arms, your legs.

The taste in your mouth is death, wet decay on your tongue. You smell like the swamp now. Like the swamp and fresh blood.

Your own meat stink chokes you.

The dogs bay. Louder. The sound presses against your ribs.

A growl tears from your throat. You snap off a dead branch. The wood bites your palm. You grip it like a spear, push off the trunk. The water swallows you again, cold shock climbing past your waist.

You lunge back to the edge, regaining purchase. Your feet search for roots, for anything solid. You hug the trunks. Something swarms your ankle—tiny fire, everywhere at once. You lurch sideways, slapping. Ants.

A hiss stops you cold. A snake coils back, head level with your hand. Another slides past your thigh into the water. Your whole body shudders.

Moonlight scatters through the canopy. You can't trust what you see.

Your foot finds what looks like ground. It isn't. You plunge to your hip, water flooding your mouth. You spit, gag, drag yourself up.

Moss tangles your face. You claw it away. Thorns rake your forearm. You rip free, leaving skin behind.

You stab at every dark shape. The stick hits nothing. Hits water. Hits wood.

Yips. Snarls. The crack and crash of bodies through brush. Closer. They don't hesitate. They know where you are.

Your legs turn to stone. Each step costs more than the last.

Branches hook your shirt, your hair. They drag you back. You wrench forward, fabric ripping. Your lungs won't fill. Each breath is half what you need.

The mud takes one shoe. You keep moving. It takes the other. Now your bare feet find every root, every sharp thing hidden below.

The water finds your cuts. It burns—salt and rot seeping in.

The stick shakes in your fist. You can't make it stop.

Every step drives something new into your feet. Thorns. Splinters. You can't stop. You leave blood in the water behind you.

The dogs' pitch changes. Higher. Hungrier. Birds explode from the trees—a roar of wings. Your heart seizes.

You look back. Your foot finds nothing. You pitch forward. Water closes over your face—cold, total, black.

You sink. The cold swallows you whole. Green darkness closes over your eyes.

You claw upward. Your feet hit muck. You shove off. Something punches through your foot—in through the sole, out through the top. The pain whites out everything.

Your face breaks the surface. You gasp, choke—swamp water floods your mouth, slick and rotting.

Your hands rake water, weeds, nothing solid. You can't move. The wood through your foot holds you like a nail.

You arch, twist—something slides past your calf. Scales.

Muscle. Your stomach heaves. Bile burns your throat. You try to scream. You choke on it instead.

The dogs crash through. Moonlight catches their teeth. Their eyes find you.

Drool swings from their jaws. Their smell hits you—wet fur, hunger, something older than fear.

The stick slips from your fingers. Your body goes quiet.

Your hands find the broken branches beneath you. You grip them. You pull yourself down.

You breathe in—one long, full breath. Then you let go.

The water closes over you. The howling warps, softens, fades.

