

## Lost and Found

By Maegan Simpson

They'd taken her. They'd taken her, and it was my fault.

Everyone says there was nothing I could've done. They say she knew what she was doing, that she wouldn't have left the trail unless she knew how to get back to it. There was no way to know the storm would come on so quickly, no way to guess how fierce it would be. She's the experienced one; she was my guide. It isn't my fault that I'd been found, and she hadn't. But they don't know the whole story.

It was supposed to be a fun trip, a girl's weekend away in celebration of my graduation. Bonding with my sister-in-law on my first overnight hike. It was supposed to be an easy trail: twenty miles on a well-established route. We would set up camp halfway through and hike the rest of the way in the morning. We were going to meet my brother and nephews at the end of the trail and camp another night before heading back to the city. Simple. Safe.

We'd made good time. I was excited to be in the mountains and managed to hike faster than my sister-in-law had planned for. It was hours before dark and we were already at our campsite. We were debating on whether we should keep going, make camp at the next spot and surprise the boys by coming early. That would've been the safer route, but I'd spotted a lake nearby and asked if we could check it out. So, we'd set up our camp and set off for the lake. It was only a quarter of a mile off the trail, barely out of sight from our tent, but it might as well have been halfway across the world. They saw us coming, and they decided my sister-in-law would make a good prize. But you must be lost before you can be found.

I knew we were in trouble when the wind kicked up. I'd felt that presence before, in the Black Forest, but back then I'd had a guide who knew the legends. He'd grabbed my arm and forced me to run back to the road, back to safety. This time I was the only one who knew what was happening, and by the time I thought to turn back to camp it was too late: the sky had darkened with clouds, and rain was already shielding our tent from sight. We stumbled around, trying to get back to the trail, but we couldn't even tell which way we were going. My sister-in-law, practical woman she is, quickly admitted what I was trying to ignore.

"We're lost," she said. That was all they were waiting for.

The wind and rain slowed above us, forming a bubble of quiet amid the unnatural storm. He appeared out of the rain: tall, pale, unearthly, alluring...terrifying. I could see glimpses of others farther away, but he was the only one who approached us. I grabbed my sister's hand and leaned in to whisper in her ear, praying that she'd listen.

"Don't give him your name, and don't make any deals with him."

She'd stared down at me, her eyes wide and uncertain. I couldn't tell if she realized what was happening or if she thought I was crazy, but I didn't have time to explain further. He would hear, and there was no telling how he'd react.

The creature spoke then, but I can't remember what he said. Something about helping us. I'd tried to refuse, but he ignored me. He wasn't interested in me, just her. The next thing I remember is waking up on a stretcher, surrounded by search and rescue carrying me down the mountain. They'd found me on the edge of the lake. My sister-in-law was nowhere to be found.

I can't tell anyone what really happened, not even my brother. They wouldn't believe me. They'd think it's hallucinations brought on by hypothermia, my mind conjuring the legends I'm obsessed with to explain the trauma. They'd think I'm crazy.

But I know the truth. My sister-in-law isn't dead, killed by exposure or dehydration. She's very much alive, and I'm going to get her back.

It's already been two weeks since that trip. My brother insisted I stay at his house for a while. He said it was to help the boys cope with losing their Mom, but when I asked he admitted he's worried about me staying in my apartment alone after what had happened. Maybe he's worried because I feel responsible, or maybe he suspects the truth. I'm not sure. He had to let me go eventually, though, and he's loosened his hold enough that I can enact my plan.

As soon as I get home, I turn on my computer and start printing every story I've ever written. I read through all of them again, remembering the characters and their tales. I gather every tale, every poem, every sloppy, barely legible scene written in the dark at two in the morning. Every journal, used and empty, and every pen and pencil I have in the house. When I'm finished, there's just enough room to fit in a few granola bars and a bottle of water. It isn't the typical survival bag, but it'll be enough. Hopefully. I have to wait to the next day to leave, and I spend most of the night tossing and turning. I'm grateful when morning comes.

The hike is longer than I remember, lonelier without my sister-in-law to talk and joke with. The air is colder than it was, even though it's still summer. A storm is coming, a natural one this time. I need to get to the lake before it hits, and I push myself on despite the dark foreboding tinting my every thought. I know the danger of what I'm doing. I know that there's no going back once I start, that if I fail my brother will lose both of us. But I have to try. I can't leave her to them.

I distract myself by going through all of the legends in my mind. Many of them are stories written in children's books, or dusty tomes of folklore that no one bothers to read anymore. Seelie and unseelie, fairy rings, the power of names, deals gone bad, changelings...legends that connect and conflict in strange ways, making it nearly impossible to distinguish fact from myth. It's hard to find any books that take the fair folk seriously, but there are other sources: Ancient women sweeping their house as they tell me their stories of faces glimpsed in the trees, of ethereal voices that lead children into the woods where they're never seen again. Women who scoff at the legends even as their gnarled hands twist rowan into a wreath for the door...just in case. Old men sitting together on docks talking and laughing with each other, their voices growing hushed as they lean in and tell me the legends. They warned me not to look for the fair folk. They warned me to stay away from places that bear the signs. I should've listened.

I spot the lake near sunset. The clouds lit with red and gold reflect off the water, furthering the alluring beauty of the place. I weave my way around trees and rocks on my way toward it, waiting for the wind to start. I reach the edge of the lake, but nothing happens. I turn, the pebbles crunching beneath my feet, and look for signs of the fair folk. I can feel their presence, but they don't show themselves. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

"I'm lost," I call out. My voice echoes off the mountains around me, even though my voice isn't that loud. Nothing happens. Are they ignoring me? Am I delusional? I turn to face the lake again. The colors are fading, and with it the light. A breeze kicks up, blowing past me and sending ripples across the water's surface.

"You're back," a voice muses behind me. "Interesting."

I turn to face the voice, unsurprised to see the same creature that approached us before. Dark eyes stare at me from a ghostly-pale face, their gaze sharp...dangerous. I lower my eyes to the ground and go down on one knee, my hands clasped over my heart in a show of respect.

"Rise, human," the man orders. His voice is cold and smooth, reminding me of the wind that continues to swirl around me. I do as he says, but I can't tell if he's pleased or annoyed at my gesture.

"What do you want?" he asks.

"I want..." My voice is barely a whisper. I clear my throat and try again. "I want to strike a deal."

"Hmmm..." he says, the sound almost a purr. He looks me over, taking in the sturdy hiking clothes and the bag slung over my shoulder. His eyes zero in on my face. "Trying to get your sister back?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to offer something great for her release, little one. She has already become very...precious to me."

I don't know what he means, and I try not to guess. I need to concentrate all my efforts on the moment, so I don't mess anything up. Fae may be unable to lie, but they have centuries of practice twisting words and finding loopholes.

"In exchange for her safe and permanent return to her husband and children, I offer myself in her stead."

His expression remains unchanged and unreadable, but he slowly approaches me until we stand only two steps apart.

"Your sister contains great beauty of form and of voice," he said, his eyes raking up and down me in disdain. "Why would you make up for her loss?"

"Because I can do something you can't."

His lips twist into a snarl. All of a sudden, I feel my utter fragility before this being who could kill me with a mere flick of his hand. My bold words were a mistake. If I'm not more careful I'll feel his power.

When he speaks, his voice is biting. "Please, little one, explain this failing you so brazenly proclaim."

"You can't tell stories."

He raises an eyebrow, his eyes still locked on mine. He doesn't say anything, and I take that as leave to continue.

"I can. I do." I pull a binder filled with stories out of my bag and open it, tilting it so he can see the first page. He glances at the page and reaches for the binder. I pull it back, nervous about giving him my stories. It's not everything I have, I know better than to show everything, but I still don't like the idea of letting him touch it. He pulls his hand back, seemingly unbothered by my paranoia.

"Why would I want a storyteller?" he asks.

But this time I can tell the difference. There's a hunger in his eyes as he looks at me, a greed that lights up his face. I almost have him, but I'm treading a thin line. He could just take me instead of agreeing to my deal.

"Because stories have power. They can take you to worlds that don't exist, introduce you to people you'll never meet, cause you to feel love and pain and joy...Stories can teach and change you in ways you couldn't imagine."

"A pretty speech," he says. He turns and walks around me in a circle, his eyes never leaving me. I turn with him so I'm always facing him. He reaches out and runs his hand over the edge of the binder. "What's to stop me from taking your stories and leaving?"

"None of them are finished." My voice wobbles, especially when his gaze returns to my eyes.

"Explain."

"Every story in this binder is missing the last few pages. If you took them from me, you'd never know how any of them end."

"And where are the endings?" he asks, his hand still on the binder.

I raise my hand to my head. "Here."

His lips spread in a smile that's...pleased. "You're clever, little one."

I don't reply. Agreeing would come off as arrogant, but arguing would annoy him. His smile widens, and he starts walking around me again.

"Alright," he says. "State the terms of your contract."

I review the words I'd planned out, but I can't remember all of them. I reach into a side pocket in my bag and pull out the rumpled piece of paper. That seems to amuse him.

"Would you like me to sign?" he asks, his voice mocking.

"Do written words hold the same power as spoken ones?"

"Maybe." He leans in until his face is mere inches away from the side of my head. "If it's signed in blood it holds *more* power."

I shiver at his voice. "A spoken agreement is enough for my purposes."

"Very well." He takes a step back, but he's still too close for my comfort. "State your terms."

"My sister will be returned to the human world, unharmed and unchanged from the state she was in before you found us two weeks ago. She and her family will be freed from the influence and interference of you and the rest of the fair folk, for as long as her bloodline continues." A lump rises in my throat and I feel panic well up inside me. I try to hide my fear and read on. "In exchange, I pledge my service to you. My life, and talents, are yours to command as long as you require them, or as long as my heart keeps beating."

I lower the paper, but my eyes don't rise above his knees. I know what I'm promising. There are no loopholes for me, no protection. If he accepts, I will be completely at his mercy. But my sister-in-law, my brother, their entire family will be safe from them. That's why I can't protect myself with added clauses and tricky wording. They're more important. I'm doing this for them. As long as they're safe, what happens to me doesn't matter. I keep repeating it in my head, but the dread doesn't recede.

"I agree to the terms and will honor the stipulations required."

I feel it, the oath binding me to him. It's like someone wrapping their fist around my heart and squeezing, and I fall to my knees from the power of it. What have I done? I look up, but if he feels it too he doesn't show it. He looks smug but...wary. As if he's not sure what to make of me. I hope that's a good thing.

He waves his hand and the wind kicks up around us, swirling around and up with a fierceness that forces me to close my eyes. When it dies down I open them again and see my sister-in-law laying on the ground before me. She's in the same clothes from our hike, and her hair is full of snarls. She's asleep, but I can see her chest rise and fall with breath.

"Come, little one," he said, gesturing for me to stand. "Time for us to leave."

I pull another note from my bag and tuck it in her hand before I stand. It explains some of what I've done, enough that hopefully she won't look for me. More than anything I want to talk to her, to tell her I'm sorry for involving her in this mess, but I know I can't. I stand and turn away from her, approaching the fae until I'm standing in front of him.

"Now that that's out of the way," he says, "will you give me your name?"

I don't fall for the trap. "You may call me Raiya."

I look up in time to see that pleased smile again as he holds out his arm to me.

"Well met, Raiya. You may call me Eurus."

I take his arm, and the wind swirls around us again, lifting us away from everything I've ever known, taking me to a completely new life in the power of one of the most feared creatures of legend.

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I'm writing this so that no matter what happens to me, those who come after will know my story. They will know that I chose this. I've only been here for a few hours, but already it's more than I ever imagined. I don't regret my choice. My family is safe from them, and I...I've prepared for this moment since I was a child. I know the fair folk: I've studied their world and their history, and I know how to live among them. I'm not just the girl who bargained her life away. I'm the storyteller. And here? ...that holds more power than they're willing to admit.