

The Forest's Queen

By Maegan Simpson

The entire forest is still and silent. Birds sit on branches, beaks shut, shifting from foot to foot as they watch the ground. Squirrels and chipmunks pause their constant search for nuts and roots to wait, for what they do not know. Even the trees hold still, the very wind holding its breath. The air is charged with fierce anticipation.

Something is about to happen: they can feel it. Whether it will lead to the realm's salvation or destruction they dare not guess, but there's no doubt that something is coming that will shape years, decades, even centuries to come. The forgotten could be remembered, the wandering come home, the faded reborn. But it all depends on the girl sitting at the edge of the trees...

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I stay just outside the shadow of the trees, trying to ignore the strange pull to edge closer. I sit because it's easier to keep my distance this way, but it doesn't help much. Even with legs crossed and hands digging into the soil, I can still feel the forest beckoning me. *Maybe I'm crazy*, I consider for the thousandth time. That's what everyone else said, what they all thought. But somehow, I can't bring myself to ignore that strange intuition that always begs me to come closer. But then, I've never given in to it, either.

Which side is the sane one? The part of me that tries to avoid the little canyon where ancient trees beckon, or the side that wants to see what adventures they hold? All the years I've lived here, and I never decided. Now I have one last chance, though...one last decision before I'm taken away to some city. Everyone says that I'll love it. Everyone says that it's exciting, the buildings stretching up to the sky and the thousands of people always moving, never living, never realizing that they're separated from the sun and wind. Everyone says I'm lucky. But I've been to the city, and I don't consider myself lucky to be forced into that cage.

The trees seem to lean towards me, the shadows inching forward until the shade is mere inches from my knee. I close my eyes to try and break off the thoughts that tell me to scoot forward. The sun scorches my skin with an almost malignant intensity, and my dark hair feels like it's a moment away from catching on fire. What little breeze there is just blows loose strands of hair into my face and does nothing to soothe the heat. *It's barely nine in the morning...why is it already so hot?* Is it just in my head, or does a hint of wind come from the forest and cool my hand?

I glance again at the trees, but someone shouts and startles me out of my strange fixation. I glance at my watch...less than an hour until we're supposed to leave. The shout might've been aimed at me, a reminder that I still need to finish packing. I lean back and lay on the grass for a moment, hands behind my head, trying to ignore the voice in my head that says I should go back. I don't want to leave, not yet. That nagging voice is persistent, though, and soon I stand, brushing dirt and grass off my clothes.

It's only in my head, I tell myself as I turn away from the trees. They're right. It's time for me to give up on silly fantasies. The city won't be so bad...I'll get used to it. I keep repeating the assurances in my head, willing them to be true.

The pull of the trees doesn't fade, not when I walk back to the house, or pack my last few belongings into cardboard boxes, not even when I step into the backseat of the car. I slip in earbuds and turn up my music until it hurts my ears, staring at the pages of a book instead of out the window as we drive away, but nothing can shake the panic penetrating to my very bones. *I've made a mistake.*

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I step to the beat of the song in my headphones, focusing on the gravel beneath my feet and *not* on the concrete path visible across the tiny excuse of a pond. I glance up at the trees, at the reeds and willows growing beside the water, at the birds flitting between branches. There are trees around me, dirt beneath my feet, growing things filling my vision, and yet...

And yet even with my music playing, I can hear the car alarm sound in the distance. The water smells like pond scum, the grass is littered with trash, and the birds can never drown out the endless, droning hum of tires on asphalt. An old man passes me, his dog walking obediently at his side. I nod and smile, and he returns the gesture. We pass without another word. I'll probably never see him again, even though I walk this path nearly every day.

Another car alarm. I hunch my shoulders and walk faster, retreating toward the little house with the insignificant backyard that I'm now supposed to call home. There's no draw to these trees. There's no call to remain. Something is missing in this place, or maybe it's in me. I wish I had listened to the call to the forest, even if only so I could understand.

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"Uaine?"

A finger pokes my arm, and I slowly turn away from the view of starlit gardens out the window to face the girl who spoke. She smiles, her teeth practically gleaming.

"I was asking what you're thinking about," the girl says. "You haven't said a word since we left the airport."

I shrug, not wanting to talk about it. The girl, Julia, is sweet, but she's the type who'd rather spend a vacation on a cruise ship than in a forest. She spent the entire flight talking about shopping. We don't have much in common. She still waits for an answer, though, and I have to hold back a sigh.

"Just looking at the trees," I say. "It's beautiful here."

"Yeah, it is."

When I don't say anything more, Julia turns away and initiates conversation with the girl across the room. I turn my gaze back to the window, angling my body away from the rest of the room. I don't want to have to have meaningless conversations with people I hardly know, especially not right now.

I study the gardens outside the window. There's nothing significant about the view, nothing except that I feel it again...the call. Something about the trees here reminds me of home. Something about the fields in the distance seemed familiar. The hedge of the garden seems to push it back, to separate the neat rows and carefully cultivated flowers from the wild *other* on the opposite side. But it's there. I thought it would be a relief to find it again, but it's somehow worse, almost painful now.

I stand there staring, trying to understand why the longing that always felt soft and persuasive is now...*demanding*. Is it my dislike of the city rising to the surface, my own mind conjuring feelings to express what I explain to others? Is it something about the place itself?

An adult sticks their head through the door long enough to tell us lights out. The other girls all climb into beds and turn out the lights. I pull the curtains over the windows and retreat to my bed. A sliver of moonlight slips through a gap, casting a line across the floor. I watch it until my eyes close against my will and I sink into sleep.

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I'm one of a handful of girls up before dawn. One takes a shower, while the other two decide to go in search of coffee. They ask if I want to join, but I decline, saying that I want to explore the gardens. We leave the room together, and they head towards the breakfast room while I turned toward the exit. Their footsteps fade as I slip through the door and close it behind me.

The air is bliss. Warm enough that I'm comfortable in my short sleeves, but with a touch of chill in the wind that brushes against my skin like a caress. I breathe it in, closing my eyes and holding out my arms to feel more of it. There's no pond scum smell, no traffic noise...just the scent of dewy flowers and songbirds calling to each other.

I walk the paths, pausing to investigate flowers and plants I've never seen before. I make my way to the edge almost sub-consciously, and when I'm at the end of the garden I turn to gaze out over the fields and random trees. There's one field toward the east, where the sky is starting to show signs of sunrise, with a single tree at its center. It's old and gnarled, shorter than the others at the edges of the fields...and the carefully plowed rows veer around it.

"You have the look."

The voice makes me jump, and I spin on my heels to face an elderly woman sitting on a bench I hadn't noticed. I stare at her for a few seconds, trying to comprehend what she said and failing. She chuckles.

"Don't have to look so scared."

“What look?” I ask. I snap my mouth shut, realizing that such a question might be rude, but it’s too late now. She doesn’t seem to take offense.

“The look of the lost ones.” She raises a cane and points it toward the lone tree I’d been studying. “The blood of the fair folk calls you to their land.”

I glance back at the tree, furrowing my eyebrows as I tried to examine where the sense was pulling me. It seemed like it’s toward the tree, like the woman said. How does she know?

“What is that tree?” I ask.

“It’s a faery tree.” She stands and walks to stand at my side, leaning on her cane as she stares out at the field. “It’s bad luck to cut them down. The fair folk like their gateways untouched.”

“Gateways to...”

The woman chuckles again. “To our realm, from where they sit. From this side...well, the name depends on who you ask, and where the gate goes might depend on who’s entering.”

I’m not sure if I understand what the woman is saying, or if I’m even meant to. Is she crazy? Or does she know more than I do? I look again at the tree.

“You said my blood calls me to their land...”

I trail off, shaking my head. I sound like I’m crazy. But when I glance at the woman, she nods. Something in her eyes, shining out from her weathered face, encourages me to go on. Those aren’t the eyes of a crazy person.

“What happens if I answer the call?”

“Well, now...I suppose you’ll find out what it’s calling you to.”

I tilt my head, surprised by her answer. She winks and turns to walk away. I watch her, failing to think of more to say or ask as my gaze is pulled back to the tree. The woman hums a haunting tune as she retreats down the path, and I wonder why it sounds familiar.

Part of me wants to turn back, to run inside and go about this day as if nothing is different. Keep on with the trip like all the other girls, go back to the suffocating city...but I already tried that. And right now I can’t stand the thought of going on for months wondering what would happen if I wasn’t a coward.

I walk down the edge of the garden and slip through a small gate near the corner. The tree is two fields away, but it feels like three steps and I’m there...standing before it with the sun rising and casting brilliant light all around me. Another step, and I’m almost close enough to reach out and touch one of its branches. Somehow, I still here the song the old woman was humming, sung by a thousand voices and yet so quiet that I have to strain my ears to hear it.

Another step, and I press my hand against the rough bark. The song is silenced, the sunlight fades away as my vision darkens and a strange wind curls around me. As it fades I feel something within snap into place, as the sounds of bird calls and creaking branches fill my ears. The trees around me are familiar, I know them even with my eyes closed.

“Welcome, our queen.”

I smile and tilt my head back. There is no audible voice, no true sound, but I recognize the greeting nonetheless. How could I have forgotten? Days, years, centuries worth of memories flood back to my mind as the forest embraces me in its grateful welcome. I take my first step forward into a new and old age. I remember, now...why I left this world, the task I was meant to accomplish. I remember why I resisted the call for so long...but my task is finished and, finally, I'm home.