

## Little Magpie

By Maegan M. Simpson

Asta runs through the forest, laughing when she sees a bird flying beside her. It pulls up, landing on its branch, but Asta keeps going. Momma said she could play until the sun left the flowers, and she wants to use all of those hours exploring. She keeps running, her cheeks red and her breath coming in huffs. She's still small, much shorter than her brothers, but she's determined not to let that stop her. Next time her brothers are playing, they won't leave her behind. She'll run fast, like them. All the way to the river.

The river is out of her reach today. She stops, collapsing on the grass and staring at the sky. The sun shines in her eyes, and she squints to avoid its glare. Even with her eyes closed, the light is too bright. She rolls over and looks around for a place to escape the sun. She sees the forest in the distance, the forest her brothers say is filled with the faery folk. Momma says they're just trying to scare her, but she still isn't supposed to go in the forest. Momma says little kids can get lost in the trees. But Asta is ten years old. She's not little anymore. She won't get lost, and she can tell her brothers she's not scared of the faeries.

In a moment, she's up and running again, this time towards the trees. She pauses at the edge to stare at the old tangle of branches that block out most of the sun, but after thinking of her brothers again she takes her first step inside. There's not as much grass in the woods, and fallen sticks poke her feet. She curls her toes and steps gingerly until she gets used to the feel of the forest floor. After walking for a while, she decides the forest isn't scary. And there are all sorts of new wonders to explore! She runs parallel to the edge of the forest, keeping the meadows in sight...just in case. But this gets boring after a while.

Asta glances back at the meadows, then at the trees around her. A few dozen feet ahead, there's a tree with a blackened scar from a lightning strike. She can remember that tree. As long as she stays within sight of it, she can find the edge of the forest. She trots over to the tree, circling it once to make sure she'll be able to recognize it, then takes off deeper into the trees. Too soon, she can barely see the lightning tree. She picks another tree, this one covered in grape vines, and repeats the procedure. After a while, she notices that the sun is creeping higher on the tree trunks. She turns around and starts back, repeating her landmarks to herself as she follows the trail back home. But soon she runs into a problem: she can't find her next landmark. She finds the three rocks all piled together, but she can't remember where the tree with the face is. After looking around, she realizes her mistake...the face is on the *other* side of the tree. Standing by the rocks, it looks like all the other trees.

She starts off in the direction she *thinks* the tree is, but soon the rocks are out of sight and she can't find the tree. She runs back to the rocks before she forgets where they are, then turns to pick a new direction. But she can't remember what direction she just tried. The sunlight is almost to the tops of the trees now...the meadows are already shadowy, and Momma will wonder where she is. She's gonna be in *so* much trouble when she gets home.

With that thought, her eyes start stinging, and she has to bite her lip to keep from crying. She won't cry. Only little kids cry. But suddenly she doesn't feel so grown up anymore. She sits

on the rocks and puts her elbows on her knees, letting the tears spill over. How is she going to get home?

Something cracks behind her, and she turns around so fast she trips over her own feet and falls. She pushes herself to her hands and knees and looks again, noticing a big black spot through the trees in front of her. A bear? No...a person. A man with a black cloak and light hair longer than hers. He's walking through the trees, a thoughtful expression on his face. Something about the man makes Asta shiver. He feels...*different*. And he looks strange. His face is finer than any of her brothers and their friends, and his shoulders are wider too. His skin is so pale, Asta wonders if he's ever been in the sunlight. *Is he a faery?* She wonders. Asta had thought faeries were big and ugly, like in her brothers' stories, but now she wonders if that's right.

Faery or not, he's someone other than trees. Maybe he'll know the way to the meadows. She stands up and runs toward him, not bothering to brush the leaves off her dress. He sees her coming and stops, looking down at her with surprise and a look like her Momma when she finds a mouse in their cottage. His distaste doesn't faze Asta, and she doesn't stop until she's by his side.

"Do you know where the tree with the face is?" she asks.

His eyebrows lower and his eyes narrow. "The tree with a face?"

"Yeah. I found the three stones, and now I need to find the tree with a face, so I can find the flower bush and get back home."

"You're lost."

Asta shakes her head furiously, causing her curls to fly around her face. She knows enough about faeries not to make that mistake.

"Not lost. I just need to find my tree."

"I don't know of any such tree. Goodbye." He turns to walk away, but Asta grabs the edge of his cloak.

"Wait. Please? You don't look like you're lost either. Don't you know where the tree is?"

He turns back to look down at her, his face filled with enough anger to make Asta tremble, but she doesn't let go. After a few moments the anger fades a bit, and the man points.

"That way."

Asta turns to look where he's pointing, making sure she won't forget, then turns back to the man. She lets go of his cloak and steps back.

"Thank you!" With that, she whips around and starts running again, hoping she can make it home before it gets too dark. She's so focused on her path that she doesn't notice how the man watches her until she's out of sight, a mixture of annoyance and curiosity painting his face.

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This time, Asta picks flowers before going in the forest. Momma was angry she was out so late, but Asta didn't tell her she went into the forest. She said she'd been exploring and forgot to start home soon enough. It wasn't a lie, right? She hadn't told her brothers anything either, scared they would tell on her.

She retraces all of her landmarks, putting a flower at each one just in case. At the tree with a face, she ties an old blue ribbon to a low branch. She doesn't see the man at the rocks, but that doesn't stop her. She wonders further in, looking for where he'd come from. Maybe if she could find his footprints, she could follow them.

The only footprints she finds are her own, but she still wanders toward where she thinks he came from, memorizing more landmarks and leaving more flowers along the way. She finds a little stream and stops, sitting down and watching the fish for a while. She twists her leftover flowers to pieces, wondering how she can find the man again. He looked sad, and she wonders why. She wonders if she can make him happy.

"You again."

Asta jumps at the voice, falling into the stream. She coughs and sputters as she stands up, then looks up to see the man standing before her. He's frowning at her, and she frowns back.

"You scared me."

"That's not my fault. Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see if I could find you again." Asta climbs out of the water and starts squeezing water out of her dress. She's going to be in trouble again. She doesn't see the surprise on the man's face. By the time she looks up, his expression is back to cold distaste.

"This forest isn't a place for human children."

"Why not? It's fun!"

"You were lost before. Was that fun?"

"I wasn't lost!"

"Enough!" he says, his voice commanding. "You've found me. Now go away."

The man steps around Asta and begins walking away from her, but she follows.

"Are you a faery?"

"If you asked some faeries that question, they'd turn you into a mushroom."

Asta nods and takes note of this new information. Don't ask faeries if they're faeries. She trots to keep up with his long stride.

"Why is your hair so long?"

"It's a symbol of my power." His voice is tight, but her brothers do the same thing when she asks them questions and all they do is tell her to go away. Or run so fast she can't keep up.

"What kind of power?"

He stops and twists down so that his face is close to her. His eyes are dark, and Asta decides they look like the sky at night. Dark and empty...but maybe not so empty as they look. She wonders if they have stars in them like the sky.

"The kind that can make human girls my slaves for eternity," he growls. "You're too annoying for me to want around, but don't try my patience. Unless you want to be a magpie for the rest of your life."

Hearing him call her annoying hurts, and that *other* feeling is a lot stronger with his face so close, but she doesn't pull back. His words remind her of their dog when he had a thorn in his paw. He snapped at whoever touched it, but once it was out he followed her oldest brother that whole week. Is she touching a thorn?

"My brothers say I'm annoying, too," Asta replies. "But they never say they'll turn me into magpies. I like magpies! They're better than crows."

The man snorts and straightens. "You're a strange child."

"My Momma says that a lot, too."

"Shouldn't you be running home now?"

Asta looks up at the trees to gauge the sunlight. "Yeah. But I have another question."

The faery sighs, but Asta ignores it.

"What can I call you?"

The faery looks down at her, meeting her eyes with an expression that's surprised.

"You don't ask for my name?"

Asta shakes her head. "I heard that faeries don't like telling people their names. But I don't want to call you the faery, because I don't want to be a mushroom. Or a magpie."

The faery raises his eyebrows, his lips turning up in what might be a smile before he schools his expression again. Asta waits patiently for him to answer, glancing at the trees again to try and decide how fast she'll have to run so she doesn't get home late again.

"Call me Kael," he finally says. Asta grins.

"Kael," she says. "You can call me Asta."

Without another word, she turns and runs away toward the rocks she can see through the trees. She glances back once and waves when she sees him watching her. He turns away and doesn't wave back, but Asta keeps her smile all the way home.

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The leaves woven in her hair flutter as Asta skips, flashing color right at the edge of her vision. Skipping is more tiring than running, but she can't help it. It's such a beautiful, wonderful day, and she's too excited.

She's early to the stream, and she waits impatiently for Kael to show up. Asta tries to watch the leaves floating on the stream to pass the time, but soon she's up and looking around at the branches above her, her energy turning even small steps into hops and twists. She hears a footstep and turns, spotting Kael walking toward her. He's walking too slowly for her taste, and she spreads her arms out and spins while she waits for him to get to her. When she stops, she's so dizzy she falls to the ground. By the time her vision clears, Kael has passed her and is still walking. Asta jumps to her feet and runs to his side.

"Hello Kael."

He doesn't say anything, though she thinks she saw him glance down at her. Undeterred, she skips to a tree in front of him and sticks her head around the side.

"It's my birthday today."

He raises his eyebrows, but still doesn't say anything.

"I'm eleven."

Still nothing. Asta is beginning to get the impression that he's trying to ignore her. She decides to keep talking anyway. That always works to make her brothers stop ignoring her. Though usually it's to yell at her to go away...

"Do faeries celebrate birthdays?" Asta asks, pulling a leaf from her hair and twirling it between her fingers.

"No."

She grins at her success. "Why not?"

"Only mortals would celebrate something so insipid."

Ah...he's in one of *those* moods. Asta drops the leaf and turns to skip at his side.

"Is it because faeries forget how old they are?"

Asta looks up at his face, which currently looks stormy with his eyebrows lowered and his eyes glaring at the trees in front of them.

“My brothers say faeries live for a really long time, but they also say they’re ugly and mean and like eating children.”

“If you don’t stop your chattering, I will show you the truth behind your brothers’ stories.”

His voice is dark and hard, and it makes Asta pause. She’s almost sure that he means it. She stops her skipping and walks normally, suddenly worried about what Kael would show her.

“But *you’re* not mean, or ugly,” she says, her voice soft.

“I’m not the only faery in these woods.”

Is it just her imagination, or is his voice less angry now? Before she can think of another question, they reach the rocks. Asta splits off from Kael, waving but not daring to call out a goodbye this time. Kael raises one hand slightly, which is more acknowledgment that she usually draws from him. It kinda looks like he’s shooing her away, but she grins anyway and spins on her toes, skipping through the trees on her way home.

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Asta glances behind her before entering the forest, making sure none of her brothers are following her. They keep asking where she goes, and she’s scared they don’t believe her stories. She doesn’t want them to know about the forest, or about Kael. She knows if Momma finds out, her trips to visit Kael will cease. They’ll think he’s dangerous, that he’s going to steal her away. They won’t understand that he needs a friend.

No one is around, and Asta runs toward the lightning tree. The flowers she left are long gone, wilted and blown away. The ribbon still hangs from the face tree, but it’s tattered and faded from the months of rain and snow it’s endured. She doesn’t need it anymore, hardly glances at it as she passes.

When she reaches the stream, she’s out of breath, but she’s grinning. She can run to the river now, but she doesn’t follow her brothers as much. They don’t go to the river as often anymore. Anyway, she prefers talking to Kael, even if he threatens to turn her into a bird.

She sees him walking toward her, but he doesn’t look up as he approaches. Asta runs up to him.

“Not today, Magpie,” he says before she can say hello. “I cannot endure your chattering. Go home.”

Asta fades a little under his fierce tone. She doesn’t want to go home, but he sounds more serious than he usually does. She follows at his side and is silent for a few moments.

"What's wrong?" she asks, trying to make her voice quiet. She doesn't want him to tell her to go away again.

He doesn't answer, and Asta knows she's hit on something. Faeries can't lie, but they can refuse to answer questions. So, *something* must be bothering him, or he would answer. After a few dozen steps, he laughs. It's a harsh sound, and something about it makes Asta sad.

"I didn't know you *could* be silent this long."

"You said you didn't want me to chatter."

"Indeed, I did."

They walk a few more steps, and Kael shakes his head. "Never mind. Chatter, Magpie. The silence is worse."

Asta tries to think of something to say, but all of a sudden her mind is empty. All she can think of is how sad and tired Kael looks.

"Maybe," she says, stepping around a sapling, "if you tell me what's bothering you, you'll feel better."

"You think so?"

His voice is harsh and demeaning, but Asta nods as if he's sincere. She watches him, trying not to stumble even though she's not looking where she's going. She trips over a rock, but Kael catches her before she can fall. When she's upright, he jerks his hand back like he's touched something nasty. Asta pretends not to notice. They walk a few more steps in silence.

"My wife died two years ago," he says suddenly, like he's still not sure whether he wants to say it or not.

Asta nods, wondering if that's why he wears black all the time.

"You miss her?" She asks.

"Yes."

Asta nods again, unsure what to say. Two years ago was when she first met him in the forest. Maybe that's why he's never friendly and his eyes are so dark all the time. Asta wonders if she can help him get his light back... She resolves to try, no matter how many times he calls her annoying or tells her to go away. Surely an annoying friend is better than no one.

"I have to go home," Asta says when they reach the three rocks. She looks up at Kael, who still watches the forest ahead. "I'm sorry about your wife."

He doesn't acknowledge her words, but Asta doesn't expect him to. She tilts her head and watches him, wondering what she can do to make him feel better. There are wildflowers in the meadows now...maybe he'll like those? Probably not...

"Why are you staring at me?"

She doesn't answer. Instead, she pulls open the little pouch hanging from her waist and sifts through its meager contents. She pulls out a little carving of a bird and holds it out to Kael.

"What's that?" He doesn't sound impressed.

"It's a bird. My brother gave it to me for my birthday."

"And?"

"And now it's yours." She stretches her hand out further toward him.

"Why would I want a child's toy?"

Asta shrugs but doesn't pull her hand back. After a few moments, Kael gingerly takes the carving and turns it over in his hand. He doesn't say thank you, but Asta doesn't mind.

"Bye, Kael," she calls, turning to run away. He never says goodbye, so she's surprised when she hears him speak.

"Until next time, Magpie."

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Asta pushes her hair out of her eyes and tucks it behind her ear, her fingers brushing the crown of leaves and flowers on her head. A smile tugs at the corners of her lips as she jogs through the trees, enjoying the quiet of the forest. The last few days her life were filled with more people than Asta ever thought she'd see, and she's glad that soon it will all go back to normal. Well, a new normal. But she's excited about that.

Kael is already at the stream when she arrives, to all appearances studying the bark of a tree. Had he waited for her? Asta shakes her head at the thought, grinning at the silliness of it. Kael the mighty faery lord doesn't wait for mere mortals.

"Your smile is even wider than usual," Kael observes in a dispassionate sort of way. "Your birthday again already?"

He probably guessed because she was dressed up more than usual, but Asta chooses to be happy he remembered regardless.

"Yes, but that's not the only reason. Two of my brothers were married today."

Kael turns to her and raises his eyebrows, clasping his hands behind his back as he starts walking. "Two? How many brothers do you have?"

"Five," Asta answers, turning to fall in at his side. "And now I have two sisters as well."

"I suppose you'll be marrying some dullard mortal as well in a few years."

Asta can't tell if his disdainful tone means he's looking forward to her being gone or if some part of him will miss her.

"Oh, I doubt it," she says, kicking up a few leaves and watching them fall to the ground. "I'm only seventeen, and none of the boys around here want to marry *me*."

The truth of her words makes her sad for a second, but she pushes it away easily enough. There's no point dwelling on it. She's not ready to be married yet, anyway.

"I can't imagine why."

She turns to Kael and grins. "Well done, Kael...you almost sounded sincere."

He huffs but doesn't respond. Asta stares at him as they walk, absentmindedly unweaving a flower from her crown that came loose during her run. She twirls it in her fingers for a few seconds, deciding if she's brave enough to try something. Why not? He seems to be in a good mood today.

She passes the flower to her other hand, then glances at Kael to make sure he's ignoring her. His eyes are fixed on the path ahead, his expression that thoughtful one he wears when he's trying to forget her presence. She takes a half step in front of him and jumps up, stabbing the stem of the flower behind his ear before he can react. He reaches out to grab her, but she dances out of his reach, laughing at the look of surprise she'd seen before turning away. When she stops and turns to face him, the flower is crushed in his hand and his eyes are murderous. She laughs again, dancing ahead and staring up at the trees.

"What's wrong Kael? Can't you appreciate a little color?"

"I can still turn you into a bird, Magpie."

"And then I'd follow you around all day, chattering in your ear." She glances back at him to make sure his anger isn't serious, then skips back to his side. He glares down at her, but she can see the stars in his eyes mixed with what *might* be humor. His frown looks more forced than usual.

"A tree, then," he says, nodding at a rosebush ahead of them. "Perhaps you'll replace that shrub over there."

"Ah, but then think of how boring your walks would be."

"How *peaceful*."

He tosses the flower to the ground, but Asta catches it and weaves it back into her hair, broken stem and all. Kael watches her with an expression Asta's not sure she's seen before. Nor can she decide what it means. She finishes and re-tucks her hair behind her ear to keep it out of her eyes. She forgot how much of a pain her hair is when it's loose. When she looks back up at Kael, he seems to realize he's been watching her and turns away to continue walking. Asta tilts her head, confused by how he's acting but not wanting to mention it. She already pushed him

more than she usually does...she doesn't want to end her visit on a sour note on such a happy day.

"I might be able to come more often now that there's more hands to help with the chores," Asta says, bounding a few steps to catch up once again.

"Wonderful."

His tone isn't quite as flat as it usually is when he's being sarcastic, and again Asta glances at him, curious at the difference of behavior. She tries to think of a comeback, but her mind is blank. She glances at the trees and sighs when she sees how late it is already.

"But for now, I have to go. Momma let me have some time for myself for my birthday, but I really ought to go help her."

"Until next time, then."

Asta looks at him, surprised he said anything. He stares back at her, his eyes more open and light-filled than she's used to. For a moment all she does is stare, but after a moment she grins and curtsseys dramatically.

"Until next time."

She looks back up and is rewarded with Kael shaking his head, his mouth too close to a smile for his longsuffering expression to be believable. Asta spins around again before leaving, her steps close to dancing even when she turns toward home. She doesn't understand Kael's new attitude, but something about it makes her feel like she's floating.

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The dirt is cold beneath her feet as Asta runs through the meadow. It's been a long winter, and there are still piles of snow beneath some of the trees. But she has to get out. She can't stand it in her home anymore, with everyone grouchy from being cooped up, and always the same chores to complete every single day with no end. And none of the fun chores, either.

She only has an hour or so before dark, but she's grown a lot in the eight years since she first entered the forest. She'll make it in time. She doesn't even glance at her old landmarks. Asta abandoned using them years ago, when she realized she was starting to leave a trail her brothers could follow. Not that she thought they would. They gave up playing a long time ago. Some of them ridicule her for still playing in the meadows, but she tries not to let it bother her. At least her new sisters seem to understand her need for a little peace.

She finally spots the stream and skids to a stop at its bank, nearly slipping into the ice-covered water. She pauses to catch her breath and looks around to see if he's here.

"If it isn't the magpie. I see you're not dead yet."

Asta turns to face Kael. He's dressed in his typical black, but with an added layer of fur that looks much warmer than her threadbare coat, passed down through too many adventurous boys before it came to her. She smiles, recognizing that the words have no bite to them.

She skips to his side. "Hello, Kael. How was your winter?"

"Long." He pauses, then follows with the obligatory, "And yours?"

"Longer."

He snorts. "I doubt that."

"*You* don't have two squalling babies stuck with you in a tiny cottage."

Asta turns and is rewarded with seeing his nose scrunch up in disgust. He starts walking and she follows, managing to match his stride except for the occasional half-skip to catch up. Even fully grown, she doesn't come close to his height.

"I take it your family is doing well, then."

"If you mean well as in alive, then yeah. Their minds might be suspect after being cooped up for so long."

"They've all reached your natural state, then."

Asta glances over at him. "Are you calling me strange?"

"I've always called you strange."

"True." Asta takes another half-skip. "So how are things in the faery r..."

"Don't."

His tone effectively silences her, being somewhere between an angry bear and her oldest brothers when the younger ones pull pranks. Still...it hurts. And it makes her curious.

"I wasn't going to ask about *that*," Asta says, referring to the information he'd accidentally spilled to her last fall. "I was just wondering if everything is going well. It's been a really hard winter at home."

He's silent for several steps, and Asta worries that she's pushed him too far.

"The winter has been difficult," he says, his voice tight. She wonders if he's talking about more than the weather.

Asta nods but can't think what else to say. Some days their walks are filled with conversation and playful bantering – playful on her end anyway. But other days it's like the first day she saw him all over again. She wonders sometimes if he thinks of her as nothing more than an annoyance that won't go away. But she vowed to be his friend even if he didn't want her, and to that she'll hold. They reach the rocks, and Asta splits off. She walks backward for a few steps.

"Until next time," she says, putting effort into being lighthearted. He nods but doesn't say anything. She tries not to be disappointed. Asta turns and starts back toward home. She walks for the first while, in case he says anything more, but he doesn't and eventually she runs to be home before dark. The air seems much colder on her way back.

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Asta pants as she runs through the trees, her lungs burning. This time there is no enjoyment, only fear. The soft bundle in her arms whimpers, and Asta tries to keep her gait smooth to not jostle the young child in her arms. The baby's skin burns with fever, her breathing as labored as Asta's. She needs to be fast. It's a miracle her brother let her take the baby at all, even if he suspects she speaks with faeries. If the rest of her family discovers she's taken little Embyn, she's not sure what they'll do.

Asta barely makes it to the rocks before she's forced to stop and catch her breath. Breathing in the cool air throws her into a coughing fit that sends fire through her lungs. It's so tempting to sit on the rocks, just for a minute. But no. She can't. She has to find Kael. But she can't go on just yet, or her legs will collapse beneath her. Even standing there they tremble violently.

"Magpie?"

Asta turns to face Kael, relief pouring through her. She stumbles towards where he stands, seeing his shocked expression but not taking it in.

"Kael," she says, her voice rough. She can feel tears coming, but she doesn't bother to stop them.

"You're sick." His voice is softer than she's ever heard it, and she's surprised he hasn't made some comment about the frailty of humans.

"I'm fine," Asta says, stuttering on the lie. "But she's not."

Asta looks down at the child in her arms, who doesn't open her eyes even with the commotion around her. Asta looks up and her heart sinks at the detached look on Kael's face. No...surely he'll help.

"You can help her," Asta says. "Please, she can't get better on her own."

"And?" The softness of his voice is gone, replaced with that cold tone Asta dislikes.

"And what? You can save her!"

"Why should I? She's nothing to me."

"Kael..." She can't believe what's she hearing. She was sure he'd help. She'd talked to her brother for over an hour, *begging* him to let her take his daughter. To help her. She can't

bring her back still sick. Asta knows faeries usually don't concern themselves with humans, but surely he won't turn away a sick child.

"Kael, please. I can't watch her die. *Please* save her."

"Do you know what it takes to heal a sickness like this? The strength it requires? Why should I waste it on a human child who will die sooner or later anyway?"

"It's not *wasting*," Asta cried, the tears now coming in earnest. "It's...it's saving a child so she can grow up, so she...she can live her life."

"A life that is a mere moment in eternity."

"But it's still a *life*."

Kael shakes his head and turns away. Asta tries to take a step toward him, but her legs nearly buckle beneath her. She watches Kael, trying to think of anything that would sway him.

"Would you do it if it was me?"

It's a dangerous question to ask. She's not sure if she wants to know the answer. If he thinks so little of humans, why would the answer change when it comes to her? Still...she has to try. Kael turns back to her, his eyebrows furrowed. Asta looks into his eyes, filled with darkness. At the moment there is no light in them, no stars interrupting the nothingness.

"If it were me dying, would you save me? I have less life left than Embyn, fewer people who care, less promise...would you let me die too?"

She and Kael stare at each other in silence for a few seconds, Asta pleading with her eyes and Kael to all appearances debating within himself. He shakes his head, but any hope that rises in her dies quickly.

"I won't heal her," he says.

He turns and starts walking away. For a few heartbeats, Asta stands there. Frozen. What else can she say? What can she, a human girl, offer that would matter to a faery lord? She grasps at a desperate idea, not even comprehending fully what it would mean.

"Kael, wait," she calls out. He doesn't stop, and Asta runs to catch up to him. Even that exertion causes another coughing fit, and when she can breathe again she sees Kael watching her. She straightens and meets his eyes. Embyn whimpers again, and Asta rubs her back in comfort.

"You said once that you have the power to enslave a girl like me for all eternity."

Kael snorts and shakes his head. "You have no idea what you're saying, Magpie."

"Yes, I do. Heal her, and I will become your slave. Forever."

Kael stares at Asta for a while. When he speaks his voice is still hard, but quieter. "You care for her that much? You're willing to give your life for hers?"

"Yes. Please."

Kael looks down at the girl in Asta's arms, then back up to her. He looks confused, but also like he's considering it.

"Forever. You can never come back here. You'll never see her grow up."

"Yes, forever. I'll give up my family...as long as she's saved."

Three heartbeats pass, and they feel like days. Finally, Kael answers. "Then I will heal her."

Asta nearly collapses in relief, but Kael isn't done.

"And I will take you to the faery realm. But not today, and not as my slave."

Asta doesn't stop to consider what that means. She slowly sinks to her knees, unable to stay standing a moment longer. "Yes. I will go. Just please heal her."

Kael kneels at her side and holds out his arms for the baby. Asta hands her over, her heart aching at how cold her chest feels now that the sick baby isn't laying against her. Kael turns so she can't see what he's doing, but it takes several long minutes of silence. Asta can hear Embyn's breathing become less labored, and when Kael finally hands her back to Asta, her skin is a healthy pink instead of the angry red she was before.

Asta takes her back, brushing Kael's hand as she does. His skin is as hot as Embyn's was. She looks up and sees a new fatigue in his eyes, and she realizes what he meant when he spoke of how difficult it would be.

"Thank you," she whispers. Her voice rasps and tickles her throat, but she manages to hold off the coughing fit.

Kael nods. "Give me your hand."

Asta shifts Embyn so she holds the baby with one arm but doesn't take her eyes off Kael. "Why?"

"You're nearly as sick as she was."

Kael reaches out to take her hand, but Asta pulls it back before he can. "I'm fine, Kael. I'm getting better."

"You can barely walk, and your coughing grates on my ears." He grabs her hand and grips it tight enough that she can't pull away.

"Kael..."

"You asked if I would let you die," Kael says, glancing up at her. "The answer is no. And I'm not going to take the chance that you succumb to sickness before I can take you to faery."

That answer catches Asta off guard long enough that by the time she thinks to react Kael is already at work. Even though he's facing her this time, she still can't see exactly what he does. She can feel it, though, and she closes her eyes as she feels the sickness leave her lungs. When it stops, she opens her eyes. Kael is looking down at her hand, but soon he looks up to meet her gaze.

"Thank you," she says, wishing she could find a better way to convey her gratitude.

Kael nods and stands. Asta stands as well, careful not to jostle the now peacefully sleeping baby in her arms. She's still weak, but she can breathe freely.

"Asta."

It's the first time he's used her name, and she can feel the weight of it. She wonders how much power she gave him when she told him her real name all those years ago. She waits for him to continue.

"The next time you meet me here, you will not go back. Be sure that you're ready."

Asta nods and turns to go. It takes her longer than usual to get back home, but that's okay. Embyn is safe, and that's all that matters. She'll think about her promise later.

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Asta stands at the edge of the woods, taking a moment to look around her and breathe everything in. She'll miss these meadows. She'll miss the forest, and the birds, and the sounds of children playing.

It's been nearly a year since she'd last stepped into the forest. She avoided Kael. She tried to forget her promise to him. He said to be sure she was ready, and she wasn't. Because as soon as she made the promise to leave, she realized what a rich life she had.

But now she also realizes that she misses Kael. She misses her trips to the forest, walking and talking with him. And she realizes that there will never be a good time to leave her family. There will never be an excuse to explain her absence, or a way to leave that won't hurt them. That's the price she paid when she promised Kael she'd come.

With another breath, she steps inside the shadow of the trees. Their shade is familiar, as is the old tree with one black side. Funny how well she remembers her first visit to the forest. Funny how she knows this one is her last. She looks down, and notices bright flowers at the bottom of the lightning tree...the same kind of flowers that she left as a marker on her second walk here. She forges ahead, and finds the same flowers growing beneath the second landmark. On and on, at each landmark she finds the same patch of flowers. All the way past the rocks, to where she first saw Kael...and where he now stands.

"Have you waited here every night?"

"Not every night," he replies, closing the distance between them. For the first time, Asta sees that he's wearing something other than black. Gray and blue, dark enough to mistake for black in low light. All the same, it's more color than she's ever seen him wear.

"Asta," he says, his voice serious. She looks up and sees the familiar expression of dispassion. "Before I bring you to my realm, you must understand what your place will be."

That doesn't sound good, but Asta takes a deep breath and nods. She agreed to this. She is ready.

"You know that the summer you found me was the summer my wife died."

"Yes." Asta remembered the evening he'd told her several years ago, by accident really. It had been the first time she saw him show true emotion other than anger. She'd only been twelve, but even then she'd grasped that Kael's cold shell covered a hurt he didn't want to admit.

"You know my...*advisors* have been pestering me to choose a new queen."

"Yes." That's the other bit of information he'd let slip that she isn't supposed to mention. Where's he going with all this? Surely not...

"I have chosen my queen," Kael says. "And tonight, I'm bringing her home."

Asta's breath catches, and for a moment all she does is stare at the faery before her. This can't be real.

"You don't mean...me? Do you?"

Kael nods. "Yes, you. My little Magpie."

"But...you can't mean...I'm no one. You can't want me."

Oh, her heart is aching now. She'd considered this at brief moments, considered *him*, but she always dismissed it as fantasy. The faery lord who tolerated her through all these years would never actually *want* her...

But if it is true... She'd come to a lot of conclusions through the year of avoiding her fate, and her love for him was one of them. It's the only thing that brought her back to the forest, knowing that it meant leaving her family. Because she can't stand the thought of a life without *him*.

She shakes her head, unable to believe what he says. She grasps at an excuse. "A nobody human girl does not become a queen of faery."

"If you do not wish to be my queen, I will give you the option to be free," Kael says, his usually even voice strained. "I will find you a place in faery, and you can live out your life there however you wish. But if you do..."

He steps toward Asta, forcing her to tip her head back to meet his eyes. She sees the stars now, brighter than ever. He waits, and after a moment she speaks. She can't *not*.

"I do. Want it, I mean. Want you."

Asta feels like an idiot at her stuttering, but Kael smiles, the first true smile she's seen from him. She can see the shell breaking, can see the light in his eyes finally shining through.

"Then there is no one who would dare to challenge you. When we marry, you will have my name, and I yours. We will be one, and every power I have will become yours as well. You will be, in essence, a faery."

"And *you* want this?" Asta has to ask. She can't let herself hope and be happy without being sure this isn't some way to fend off those pestering him.

"Yes, I want you." His smile widens, and he leans toward her. "I want the strange little human brave enough to befriend a faery, one who could've silenced her quite easily I might add."

"I knew you could've."

"And that's why I didn't. You knew, and yet you still insisted on following me, asking your questions. I didn't understand that kind of devotion. But I think I'm starting to."

"And you love me." She feels impossibly bold asking that question, but he speaks and sends her heart soaring before she has time to regret it.

"Yes. In a way I never thought I could feel again. Do you?"

"Yes," Asta admits in a voice so small she's not sure he can hear her. "I thought it was strange and pointless, but I do."

"Strange, maybe. But never pointless." He leans even further down, his breath tickling her ear. "Are you ready to come to faery?"

"Yes," she answers, oddly breathless.

He takes her hands and pulls her forward, not bothering to look where he's going. Asta doesn't either, her gaze caught in his eyes. She's never seen him like this, never truly seen this tender side of him. Maybe glimpses, but it was always gone before she could be sure it was ever there in the first place.

A ways after the rocks where she always left him, Asta feels something in the air change. There are new sounds, and smells, and more to the forest than she had ever noticed. Everything feels other, strange, enchanted...like Kael. All these years, she was only a few steps away? How could such a small distance change so much? It's almost too much to take in, but with her hands in Kael's she feels strangely at ease.

While she's taking in all of the wonder around her, Kael moves so he stands behind her, his hands on her shoulders. He whispers in her ear, providing a breath of the familiar in the midst of everything foreign.

"Welcome home, Magpie."