

## Saint Nick

"Three miles - current pace 10 minutes 21 seconds - average pace 10 minutes 34 seconds." The robotic voice chirps in my ear, signaling me to turn around. The trail is empty this evening. Not that it's ever busy - most people prefer to run on treadmills in the winter, but not me. I need the breeze in my face, the company of trees, and the challenge of natural hills.

Normally, I'm a dawn runner, but the morning got away from me. So it's a race against dusk. I pick up the pace just a little. It's three miles back to the trailhead. No need to blow all of my speed early, but also, I can't get lost out here again. Trying to find the trail in the dark is nearly impossible. Last time, I ended up twisting my ankle on a root and hobbled my way in circles until I found a hiker who could point me in the right direction.

I hurdle a small stream and take the path around overgrown parts of the forest. Arcadia Woods isn't exactly designed for runners. No paved paths or lights to guide you; not even a trail map. I mostly look for the pre-trampled brush and the occasional landmark to get me from point A to B. Like the copse of birch trees coming up on my right. I definitely passed those earlier - a good sign.

Something glimmers behind the birches. No, that's not quite right. It's more like something reflective is back there, and I happened into the path of the light. It reminds me of that survival exercise we did as a team-building exercise. One of the best ways to get help is to signal with a hand mirror. *Oh god, what if someone is hurt?*

"Hello?" I call out, but there's no response. It's probably nothing, but I need to be sure. So, I start tramping through the underbrush toward the area where I saw the light.

As I move past the first few trees the atmosphere changes. It feels fuzzy, like the staticky feeling from the old-school television screens. Must be some sort of weird nature thing that I don't know about. *Science - the reason for everything.* I'll google it later.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" I call again. No verbal response or mirror signals, but I hear a rustling to the left and follow. I'm pushing my way around a big oak tree when I see something floating up ahead. An opalescent tendril of mist about seven feet tall hovers just off the ground. It undulates and the pastel hues change with the movement. The static is definitely emanating from this thing. *What is it?* It's not hot. It's just... there. I reach my hand out -

"Don't touch that!" a voice booms from behind me. I startle and turn to see the most beautiful man I've ever laid eyes on, wearing what appears to be cosplay. He's got white blonde hair, pointy ears, and a calf-length coat of royal blue velvet trimmed with gold. What the hell? His boots crunch through the leaves as he makes his way over to me.

"What is it?"

"That doesn't matter - go back to your run." He's unnecessarily bossy for a cosplayer in the middle of the woods. I fold my arms across my chest and stare him down.

"Is there a nerd convention happening out here or something?"

"What?" he's about 5 feet away and I can see that in addition to the fantasy getup, he's wearing body glitter. I'm not about to be ordered around by a man in a sparkly elf costume.

I gesture at his attire, "You're in a costume, in the middle of the woods... Wait- is this a religious thing?"

He cracks a smile, "Sure, let's say it's a religious thing."

We stand there looking at each other. I'm waiting for an explanation and it looks like he's waiting for me to leave. The joke's on him, I'm not moving until I get answers. *Shit, the person flashing for help.*

"Are you the only one out here?" I ask.

"You're out here." He deadpans.

"Duh, but I saw a flash earlier and I thought it might be someone who needs help."

A smile quirks at the corner of his mouth. "No, that was... something else. Don't worry about it."

Anxiety blooms in my chest. Maybe he's a serial killer and I'm about to be murdered by the Arcadia Maniac or whatever they'd call him. Or maybe he's already got someone tied up, and I interrupted his serial killer ritual.

I take a step back and look for a quick exit. He notes this and steps forward. "I'm not a serial killer if that's what you're thinking." *Ha! That's what all serial killers say before they gut you like a prized deer.* I take another step back and trip over a root, falling ungracefully into the leaves. *Damnit.*

He reaches out; I begrudgingly take his hand. "Thanks" I mutter, dusting leaves from my leggings.

"How did you find this place?"

I furrow my brow, "Arcadia Woods? It's a state park. Not exactly top secret."

"No, this *part* of the wood. Humans don't normally come this way."

Oh my god, he thinks he's a creature. Fuck, maybe he *is* a creature. He's going to kill me, or worse, hold me captive in his creaturey lair.

*Ok, don't panic.* Creatures can probably smell panic. Deep breath. I can get out of this. I just need a way to distract him so I can make a run for it.

He's still waiting for an answer. "I told you. I saw a light and thought it was someone signaling for help. My bad!" I throw my hands up. "If you're not hurt, I need to get going. My boyfriend is waiting for me just up ahead." I improvise the boyfriend thing. *He can't kill me if someone is going to come looking, right?*

"I'm fine - you can leave." He nods his head the way that I came.

I start to go, then reconsider. "What are *you* doing out here?"

"That's none of your concern."

"Seems pretty shady that you're dressed up like a faerie in the middle of Arcadia at dusk..." Why am I baiting him? He bursts into laughter. Not a chuckle, I mean a throw-your-head-back belly laugh. He collects himself and wipes the laugh tears from his eyes. "I have to know, what is the human fascination with faeries, anyway? I've heard about your fantasy fae books and they're not even close."

I'm slightly offended (I love the ACOTAR series), but more than that I'm weirded out. He's talking like they're real. "They're *fantasy* novels - it's make-believe. There's no right way to do make-believe!"

"Of course. My mistake." He considers a moment "Would you like to see one?"

"A faerie?"

He nods. "She's around here somewhere..." He looks around. "ARABELLA! Show yourself!"

*This is my out!* I'm going to wait for him to go off looking for the faerie and then I can - "Holy shit!" I nearly stumble again but he puts a hand on my shoulder to steady me. There's a tiny humanoid creature with wings flitting over.

She? I guess it's a she - is about the size of a Barbie doll but nowhere near as pretty. She's wearing what could be rags or maybe tree bark. Either way, she's filthy and her hair is matted. Oh god, she smells like she hasn't bathed in six months.

"Arabella, may I introduce... sorry, I didn't catch your name." She flits into his open hand and sits, kicking her legs back and forth over the edge of his palm.

"Sam" I choke out.

"Arabella, this is Sam. I believe you lured her out here. Would you like to explain yourself?"

The fairy holds up a middle finger and turns away.

"Charming, isn't she?" He's grinning. "Is that? Is she? What the fuck is going on around here? Who are you!?" I demand.

"Ah, yes, about that. I'm Nicholas, Lord of the Northern Elves." He bows, extending the hand that's holding the fairy so as not to topple her out.

"I suspect the flash you saw was sunlight reflecting off of Arabella's wings."

He could be right. The only part of her that isn't crusted with dirt is her wings. They haven't stopped moving even though she's sitting, and they look like liquid mirrors. She catches me staring.

"Fuck off, Nick!" She squeaks.

"She's everything you dreamed of, right?" Arabella snarls at his sarcasm.

I open and close my mouth like a fish, not sure how to respond. Clearly, she's in a pissy mood and I don't want to make it worse.

"So... you're an elf?" I start.

"Yes."

"And that's a faerie?"

"Correct." He places Arabella on his shoulder and she bares her teeth at me. It might be a faerie smile but I'm pretty sure it's menacing. I pinch my arm just to make sure I'm not dreaming this.

Nicholas notices, "It's a lot to take in, I'm sure."

I stare, still unbelieving.

"Are you done showboating, my liege?" she seethes.

"You forget yourself, faerie. - now shut up and let's go!"

If she feels chastised by his response, she doesn't show it. Instead, she brushes at something on her shoulder and huffs.

Nicholas turns to me, "Can you find your way back?" I nod.

"Very well. Happy Solstice, Sam."

And with that, he strides off in the direction of that wispy thing... *Huh, where did it go?* The elf is circling trees, footfalls becoming more staccato with every turn.

"Damnit Arabella!" he bellows.

The faerie flits up and out of reach, ten feet in the air. "Manners, manners, highness." She snarks.

"You realize we're stuck here now, right?"

Laughter dies in her throat. "Can't you fix it?"

"It's not broken, you simpleton! It's closed!"

Her mouth makes the shape of a perfect O and she droops back down to our level like an autumn leaf. "But, it doesn't close until after dusk."

"Holiday hours..." he sighs.

She starts braying like a tiny donkey. Fae laughter? His eyebrow quirks.

"You locked yourself out of your own kingdom! Oh my god! I can't..." She doubles over with more braying. Faerie laughter is obnoxious, for the record.

"So... that cloud thing was a door?" I felt like I needed to say something.

"Portal." He corrects.

"Right, portal... when will it come back?"

"Tomorrow at sunrise." He sighs.

"What?!" Arabella is shocked. "But, Nick, where are we going to stay? What are we going to do? What about Solstice?"

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you got yourself banished!"

She blushes and then sits on his shoulder. "It's not my fault! Tarek is overly sensitive."

"You called his mother a walking case of chlamydia!"

Her pout turns wicked, "Nick, come on! Like you haven't looked at her and thought 'Oh my god, if chlamydia were a gnome it would look like Mrs. Hassan'."

He flicks the faerie off of his shoulder - plink.

I try -and fail- to stifle a laugh. "Is my size amusing to you human?" She's glowering. "You know it's very offensive to be so heightist. Stature dysmorphia is a serious problem among Fae Folk."

Now Nick bursts into laughter, "Come off it, Arabella. If you cared anything about what you look like, you'd bother to brush your hair or bathe!"

"I'm making a political statement!"

“What, size doesn’t matter but smell does?”

She flips him off again and flies up to perch on the nearest branch.

His sapphire blue eyes cut into me - “I hate to ask, but could you give us a ride?”

I look him over before I commit to anything. If the faerie gets out of hand, there’s a decent chance I can roll down a window and have the wind suck her out. But the elf is the full size - I’d wager 5’ 10” - He seems safe, but I’m pretty sure there’s a warning about making deals with magical creatures... but then again, this isn’t a deal, per se, it’s an offer. Nothing is being exchanged.

“Uhm sure. Yeah, I can do that.” This is either going to be a hell of a story - or I’m going to end up on Unsolved Mysteries.

---

Bonus! Faeries are bioluminescent. At least that’s what it looks like. Arabella’s glow is hugely helpful for avoiding trip hazards and wrong turns. Every once in a while she flies above the tree canopy to make sure we’re going in the right direction.

Nick leans over the next time she’s out of earshot, “Thanks for this. I know magical beings haven’t exactly behaved on this side of the realm, but we aren’t all bad. Though, to be fair, humans tend to exaggerate the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean your fairy tales paint us as either all good or all bad, but we’re just trying to make the best of things - like humans.”

He holds a large pine branch back while I pass. “Take Arabella, for example. She probably seems like a loose cannon with a foul mouth.”

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth “Yeah, a little bit.”

“Right, so, if a human, not you of course, but another human, were to talk about her to their friends, and then those friends tell other friends, and so on - she’d end up a villain in a fairy tale. But really, she’s a normal faerie. The fae have full-sized emotions in pint-sized bodies - they all say what they think at the exact moment they think it. Arabella just watches a lot of American television, so she’s gotten really good at quick comebacks and smack talk.”

“So why is she banished?”

“Because she offended the gate gnome. She doesn’t get a pass because she’s fae. It’s harder for her to control herself - not impossible - and don’t tell her I said this but Tarek is a little sensitive.”

"Why did you come after her?"

Now he's smiling, "Because she's the best reindeer trainer we've had in centuries. She's a genius with things that can't talk back."

She swoops in front of us, flying backward at eye level. "Are you talking about me?"

"Of course." His eyes sparkle at her. "Whatever he's said, it's probably a lie." She folds her arms across her chest and narrows her eyes at him.

He beams back, "You aren't my best reindeer trainer?"

Apparently, this was the right thing to say. She pirouettes mid-air. "You better believe it - those fur-covered slugs would be nothing without me."

I recognize this part of the wood. We're only a couple hundred yards from the trailhead and my car. "Where will you guys stay?"

"Yeah, my liege, where are we going to stay?" She's perched herself back on his shoulder and is snuggling into his long white hair.

"There's a priest who owes me a favor. We can stay with him."

---

In the car, Nick sits shotgun while Arabella stands on the door handle peering out the window. She's dancing to Frosty the Snowman, enchanted by the Christmas decorations we pass. The storefronts in downtown have string lights and winter scenes on display. I hadn't paid much attention before, but it's charming.

We pass a school with those inflatable decorations. Arabella looks at Nick, "Why do they always make you fat, bearded, and old?"

I whip my head to stare at him and nearly drive us off the road. "What?! You're Santa Claus?" The car behind me blares its horn, and I try to calm myself and focus on driving.

Nick sighs, "Kind of, but it's not what you're thinking."

"Explain!" I demand. Arabella is sitting on the dash, grinning at Nick. "Ooo, you're in trouble, your Lordship."

He runs a hand through his hair, "When I was young, I was fascinated by humans. I spent a lot of time in your world, trying to learn what I could about your government. On our side, my father had just signed a peace treaty with the Orc Counsel, granting them land and citizenship in exchange for their fealty and taxes. This was similar to the feudal system in your world."

“One year an early frost ruined most of the crops in the area. What you’d call holiday spirit was non-existent. It was every family for themselves. On one of my visits, I saw a young boy fall into an icy river. The cold doesn’t affect me like it would you, so I dove in and pulled him out. His mother was beside herself with gratitude and asked how she could ever repay me. I saw a chance to create a larger good and told her to help someone else whenever she saw a need. She asked my name and I told her it was Nick”

“She was the wife of a wealthy farmer and she shared her own store-rooms with her neighbors that winter. Those neighbors added to the communal cupboard in whatever way they could. When the town pooled its resources they realized they had more than enough to make it through the winter. So they started leaving small gifts of food and goods in other towns as a way to honor “Saint Nick”. Legends are often borne out of ordinary acts.”

Arabella starts kicking her feet, “Yes, yes, that’s all very noble Nick, but why do they always make you old and fat?”

He laughs, “Oh, you can thank the Coca-Cola Corporation for that one. Before their artist took liberties with my image, people thought I was handsome.” He waggles his eyebrows at her, and she laughs.

A few minutes later I pull into the church parking lot. “Ok, we’re here.” “Thank you, Sam, you’ve been most helpful.” He opens the door to leave, but before he can move I put a hand in the crook of his arm. “Are you going to be ok?”

His eyes sparkle, “Yes. We will be just fine. Randy is an old friend.”

I watch them walk into the church and then sit there trying to wrap my head around what the hell just happened. This is by far the weirdest day I’ve ever had.

---

On Christmas morning I wake to the sound of tapping at the front door. I drag myself across the apartment and peer through the peephole but no one is there. Weird. When I turn around I see a large cup of coffee sitting on my kitchen countertop with a note.

*Dear Sam,*

*I checked my list twice, and you’ve been a very good girl this year. Please accept this coffee and an IOU from your favorite elf. Also, Arabella says “hi”.*

Nicholas Klaus Lord of the North