

# Jaq and the Blinded Fae

*A fairy tale of Mercia*

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I will tell ye a tale of Mercia. 'Tis an old tale, and a black one. You may have heard it told before, perhaps with a happy ending. This is the truth of it, for truth only will I tell, even be it unlovely.

Many years ago, before the Drift and before the Breaking, a foolish king and his clever wife ruled together over all this land.

The king was forever riding into battle and starting wars over every small slight. Meanwhile, his wise and sensible wife made peace wherever she went and was well loved by all.

It came to pass, as these things do, that the queen fell pregnant and some time later she gave birth to a boy prince. But after she had given birth, her bleeding did not stop. The king called for doctors,

but none could help her, and that night she died. The king declared a full month of mourning, and all the kingdom grieved for her.

The king named the boy Jaq, which in the language of the time meant *blood*. The boy loved to ride and hunt, and his most prized possession was the white mare that had belonged to his mother.

After a time, the king married again, a woman whose beauty was surpassed only by her cunning. She was a widow, and she brought with her a son, as ill-favoured as Jaq was handsome. The boy would follow Jaq around the castle and grounds, calling out insults until Jaq turned and struck him. Then the boy would run crying to his mother, and Jaq would be sent off in disgrace.

The widow-queen hated Jaq, and wished to see her own son on the throne. She schemed against him, and longed to find a way to end him, but she was afraid to shed royal blood, for as everyone knows, ill-fortune follows a kingkiller.

One morning, she took the form of a hart and pranced before the castle gates. Jaq, who loved to hunt, leapt onto the white mare that had belonged to his mother and gave chase through the greenwood. He hunted the hart all day until the country became unfamiliar, and he realised he had entered the darkling realm. But the horse, being clever, remembered its way. The horse and the prince walked all day, and all the next day, until they found themselves back in the daylight lands and returned, shaken but triumphant, to the castle.

The widow-queen was dismayed by this, but she would not give up. She took the form of a pure black bear, with eyes of flame and claws like tangled wire. Then she let herself be seen, stalking the woods near the castle. Jaq took up his sword and his bow and leapt on his horse once again, hoping to end the monster and take its head.

The widow-queen allowed him to chase her. She ran; not too fast, but just fast enough, and did not stop until they were both very far from the castle, beyond the shadow gates, deep in the darkling realm.

Then she slowed her pace and allowed him to catch her. Just as Jaq was about to plunge his sword into her side, she reared up and struck the white horse about the head, again and again, until its tongue lolled and it lay dead and broken.

Then she struck at Jaq, knocking away his sword and breaking his bow. But still she did not kill him, because she was afraid of the curse.

Taking her own form once more. She seized Jaq and bound him hand and foot.

Now the queen had a problem. She was mightily fearful of what Jaq would tell if he returned to the castle, but wisely she was even more afraid to spill royal blood, so:

She pin-pricked his eyes, to keep him from seeing,  
She burned out his ears, to keep him from hearing,  
She cut out his tongue, to keep him from telling,  
She chopped off his hands, to keep him from fighting.

Then she left him, bound, alone and friendless in the darkling deep of the greenwood fell.

Now, it so happened that there was a young girl who lived near that place.

She was a creature of leaf and green, and if she were not of the Aden, why she were kin unto them, fair as she was. One flaw only

marred her, for she was blind, but, being clever, she made her way in the forest hunting by ear and by smell. So practised was she at this that you might at first mistake her for a person with natural sight, but for the fact that she would never look at a person when they spoke, but rather cock her head and listen.

She heard Jaq crying wordlessly in the woods and at first mistook him for a prey animal, but once she realised what he was, she took pity on him. She dragged him to her little hut and tended to his wounds.

They could not see one another, for both were blind, but the girl could see well enough with her hands. Jaq, however, had neither eyes nor hands, nor ears to hear with, nor tongue to tell, but he felt her tears on his cheek and the brush of her hair, and he knew well enough that she cared for him.

As you well know, all magic is a bargain, and one thing can be swapped for another, provided the balance is preserved.

The girl had been alone for so long, and she longed to hear Jaq's story, and so she gifted him her tongue, and she became mute. Then she gifted him one of her ears, so that he could hear the words that came from his mouth and understand what she had done for him.

Magic and fair trade are akin, so she became half deaf, while he regained half of his hearing. She became mute, while he began to speak, using her small, delicate, lilting voice.

When he heard the sounds coming from his mouth, he fell in love at once, for her voice was sweet as a melody.

"Your voice is better than seeing," he said. "I would keep it always."

And she smiled to find that her gift was so acceptable to him, though he could not see her smiling, nor understand how beautiful she was.

Then he spoke and sang his tale to her, delighting in the music of her voice. All the while, she listened intently, touching his arm to tell him that she understood. After he was done, she let him know through signs, that she would help him return to the castle and regain the kingdom that belonged to his father. She trusted him, for she had been alone for many years, and had forgotten the folly of men.

Though she had never left the darkling realm, she knew the way to the shadow gates that led back into the sunlit lands. She was a good traveller. She had grown up blind and knew how to place a foot between roots, or follow a sunken road. Jaq, on the other hand, stumbled over every trailing bramble and cried out in her voice over and over, cursing his father, his stepmother, and her ugly son. Oh, it was funny to hear her sweet voice utter such curses.

She held the stump of his arm in her small hand, but she could not support him, so he asked her plain, using her voice. "Please," he said. "Will you gift me one of your hands, so that I may travel more easily?"

Still she trusted him, and so she gave him her own right hand. The small hand formed on the end of his thick brown arm, even as it disappeared from her own wrist. All magic is trade.

And so they travelled together, hand in hand, until they felt the warm light of the sun on their skin and they knew they had arrived.

Now they were in the sunlit realms once more, they heard the distant sounds of music and revelry.

A drover was working in a field nearby. Jaq knew him by the noises he made as he worked among his cattle. Jaq called out to him in his woman's voice.

"What is that music?" he asked. "And where does it come from?"

"Why haven't ye heard?" the drover replied. "The old king is dead by the sword, and a new boy king rises to the throne. That be the feast of his assumption."

Jaq wept to hear of the death of his father, and called down curses on the drover for his impiousness. Then he vowed vengeance against the widow-queen and her ugly son, and hand-in-hand with the mute fae girl, he made his way to the castle.

The gates were shut and bolted, but Jaq knew the secrets of the walls, so together they entered through a hidden way, under the floors and through the spaces between rooms, until they came upon the throne room where the drunken revellers were feasting and celebrating.

"If I but had my sight," he said to the blind-mute fae girl, "I would cut these traitors down, man, woman and child."

Of course, she had no eyes to give him, but she willingly traded something of equal worth.

All magic is a bargain, and one thing can be swapped for another, provided the balance is preserved. Her beauty was surpassing, such that one glance at her were worth a thousand years of natural sight.

Trusting in the virtue of the prince, she traded all her loveliness, and gave him back his eyes.

Finding himself able to see once more, he leapt from his hiding place. He snatched up his father's sword, that hung above the throne, and began cutting and killing, slicing arms and bodies and heads. The revellers were unarmed, and were too drunk to offer resistance. They crowded around the doors, desperate to escape, but the crush of them was such that it forced the doors shut, and Jaq struck at them from behind, over and over, until they lay in a heap and non still moved.

The widow-queen took on her bear form, with eyes aflame, and twisted claws of metal, but Jaq was ready and he struck her in the neck with his father's sword. Her head rolled free, becoming once again a woman.

Only her son, the new boy-king remained, crying in fear over the body of his slain mother, clutching her head to his breast and kissing her thick brown hair. Ill-luck follows a kingkiller, but Jaq did not care, such was the fire and fury in his heart. He struck the boy with his sword, and the new king's blood flowed, mingling with the pool on the throne room floor.

The fae girl, bereft of her beauty, listened to all this with her one ear. Part of her exulted in the triumph of her lover, but a second, larger part wept at the killing that she had brought about.

Jaq took time to finish the job properly, and when all the crying and moaning was done, he sought to see the woman who had aided him through so many trials.

But she was no longer beautiful. Where once she had been leaf and green, now she was handless, earless, tongueless, robbed of her

beauty. A mass of rippled flesh, hair and loose skin. Horrified by the sight of her Jaq kicked her and punched her and struck her with the hilt of his sword. He drove her from the hall and out of the castle, weeping into the night.

She crept back over the country, through the shadow-gates, into the darkling realm, until she came at last to the place where the white horse lay, dead and fly-blown in the glade where she had first found Jaq. With the last of her magic, she touched its broken head, and life flushed back into it. Magic requires a true exchange, and so she also took on a half-life, an undying life, void of joy or love.

Then she mounted the slain white horse and rode out across the woods, crying for sorrow and fury without a tongue.

And what became of her, you may ask? Well, still she rides, astride the charger that belonged to her lover's mother. You will have heard of her to be sure.

Folks call her the Ail, for that is the sound she makes in the night as she rides. You may hear the sound yourself when the moon is narrow. Young lovers would be wise not to walk alone in the woods for she does not forget, and she does not forgive.

And now no more will I tell, except to say, take care when you play in the woods and do not stray too far from the walls.

*From The Collected Fairy Tales of Mercia and Aladice.*