

“Josephine and The Stag”

You could say that life was idyllic for my partner and I; we had spent many long years basking in the warm sun, reveling in the mountain breeze. Our days were filled with laughter, ours mingling with the stuttering joy of our daughter. Our sweet little girl.

It was because of her we had made our way to what was once a small slice of paradise. When we arrived all was well, the grass was lush, the season mild, and all manner of animals roamed about unafraid. There was a particular old buck that our Josephine had taken to right away, and he to her. He could sense she was special. And his many years of life had taught him a quiet sort of kindness.

The first time we met him, Josie was having a fit. She couldn't understand why we had taken away the small turtle she was playing with, she didn't understand her rough antics were hurting the poor little guy. So she screamed, and flailed, and beat the ground. Nothing we could do would calm her. Until the buck appeared in all his magnificent glory, 8 times jutting proudly from his head. We watched with bated breath as he approached us, unsure of whether we should run. He looked straight into her eyes with his warm brown ones, and gently blew into her face. Josie quieted for a moment, and then let out a bark of delighted laughter. All three of us made a good friend that day.

The friendship lasted well over a lifetime. In this realm between fae and mortal, time passed differently. In fact, in many ways we couldn't sense it passing at all. Even the difference between day and night was only a dim sort of dusky twilight, a slight pallor to the air. But living indefinitely came with its own set of consequences.

We missed the changing of the seasons, so much so we even missed bad and acclimate weather. We missed the company of other people; the friends we had had, parties and *babysitters*. Our perception of our climate transitioned from what we experienced externally, to what we felt inside. Warm balmy summer days were when we were feeling lazy and exceptionally in love. When resentments built, we were in for a storm. Our emotions marked the time, it was the only calendar that mattered.

And we were often very happy. We would go down to the spring to play in the water. Josie splashing happily in the shallows. Our buck, whom Josie dubbed "JoJo" (one of the only words she could verbally reproduce consistently) would come with us, and she loved to tug his tail and ride upon his back.

We also loved to take her exploring, and show her all the fascinating things we found. Brightly colored insects and rough textured fungi, nice smelling herbs and crinkly grass. Her laughter would echo off of the trees. We showed her everything we could, but took care not to get too close to the boundaries of our magically protected home.

I enjoyed my life, but at times the resentment built so strongly it buffeted me like a tropical storm. My heart felt like the fleshy cage of some beast trying to tear its way out with talons as sharp as serrated sea shells. Those times became more and more often as the land around us slowly perished.

Nothing could die, and therefore nothing could grow. In the course of 300 years we had taken paradise and had picked at it, trampled over it, and eaten it until slowly there was hardly anything left. Even the grass was picked bald in spots where Josie had sat and pulled each sprig up one by one.

We would talk late into the night about what we should do. The decision to come had been easy enough; it wasn't hard to set aside our creature comforts to come up here and live together as a family for eternity. Not when the other option was to eventually lose the ability to care for Josie.

When she was young she had simply stopped progressing as other children do. But her body hadn't stopped growing, or getting stronger. We didn't know exactly how difficult it would be to keep her safe when her body was grown, but we could imagine. And imagining her fate should we die was unacceptable. By the time we had arrived she was already almost stronger than both of us put together; we had found our salvation in the nick of time.

Yes, to choose to come here was an easy decision. We had chosen life. Choosing to die, that was another matter entirely.

The days wore on, and with each passing dusk we slowly quit discussing our perishing home. We wrapped our arms around each other talked about the time Josie had accidentally slipped off of JoJos rump. It hadn't been a long fall since he had been lying down, but her comical expression of surprise had us in fits of laughter- especially when he had turned his head and licked her chin to forehead!

Days slipped quietly away as we took Josie to the pond to let the fish nibble her toes. After 300 years we did not know that our love could grow any deeper, but grow it did. Each day we passed the desolate hollows of life around us, and next to it the love of our family shone brighter. We shielded our eyes from the empty orchards and gave Josie tender morsels while we ignored our hunger. We knew what we had to do, but neither of us could do it. Instead we lifted our voices to Josie's favorite melodies, her lovely alto blending perfectly with my soprano- and ignored reality.

I don't know how much longer we would have continued that way if the buck hadn't died. It happened on our morning outing, as we all three walked hand in hand to one of the last truly beautiful places we had left, a shot cracked the air. I thought it was thunder. The trees seemed to shake in the fury of it. Josie started to cry.

We began to try and calm her, hushing and cooing. Loving hands gently caressing her cheeks and wiping away tears. Usually, after a fright, JoJo would appear, and his soft nose would snuffle her, and a tongue would come out to taste the salty dew on her cheeks. "I'll go and find him", I said when he didn't show up. I felt uneasy about the noise, and a look into my partner's eyes told me she did too. I ventured further into the clearing, rounded the bend and there he was. But he wasn't moving.

It had been 300 years, but I still knew death when I saw it. I let out a cry and ran to him, our dear friend. His neck bled heavily, although no arrow protruded from it. I put his head in my lap and stroked him gently as the brightness faded. A choked sob escaped as I let the grief roll through me, I would need to go back soon, but first, I had to feel the loss of him, my love for him. It was the only gift I had left to give. The beast inside my heart escaped the interior and wrapped around the exterior instead. It squeezed so tightly that I felt my heart compress nearly into stone from the pressure of my emotion- and then it relaxed and sadness gave way to a

wave of love that hurt all the more for its beauty. I knew then that I was grieving for more than just JoJo.

I wiped my streaked face with the back of my hand and stood up. I hated to leave him out in the field, but I had to protect my daughter from seeing him lifeless, she wouldn't understand. I knew the wise old buck that had been our family friend wouldn't hold that against me. A deep breath, and back to the family.

When I arrived, Josie was still sniffing badly. I put on a jaunty air and trotted up saying in a jubilant voice, "JoJo had an important errand to run, but he told me to give you THIS!" And suddenly Josie was being licked and slobbered on by her mother at least as much as she ever had been by the buck.

As she laughed in merriment, I locked eyes with her other mother. I saw her take in my expression, the blood stains on my clothes, and the tracks left by my tears on my cheeks. I watched her mouth part ever so slightly when she understood. Then those same lips settled firmly in resolve, her gaze piercing me deeply; asking. I tilted my head in an approximation of a nod.

"Josie- bean, your mama's have something special to show you today! Would you like that? It's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen- it's magic!" I heard her say excitedly to our beautiful, clever, extraordinary daughter- all signs of worry (and her 342 years) gone from her face. Together, we walked further than we had ever taken Josie before.

The edge of the enchantment was a sight to behold. Between the two worlds was a barrier of color, dappling and moving as if it were alive. Maybe it was. Dark purple and gray, streaks of teal and gold all flashed in front of us like oil. At the same time that it was impenetrable, it was transparent. Josie was drawn to it as we knew she would be.

Behind us was our happy lives, the contented years we had stolen for ourselves and our daughter. Years she wouldn't have had otherwise. Ahead of us was the world we had left behind, a world three hundred years into our future. A world without magic to hold our bodies together and animate our minds. But also, peace.

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One last look into each other's eyes, a deep kiss. We knelt simultaneously to wrap our arms around our exquisite daughter and held her lovingly for a moment before she started to fidget.

"Do you want to go explore through there?" I heard myself say. Then we held hands and stepped forward through the barrier-

and into dust.