Shadows of Winterspell

Stella has been living behind the magic of Winterspell Forest for most of her life. Lonely, she enrolls at the local school and as she begins to make friends, discovers that she is at the heart of a fae legend that could change everything.

As Autumn turns to magical Winter, Stella realizes that confronting her own family secret is the only way to release the forest from the shadowy grip of a dark and bitter magic . . .

A seasonal magical adventure from the critically-acclaimed Amy Wilson.

Also by Amy Wilson

A Girl Called Owl

A Far Away Magic

Snowglobe

AMY WILSON

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UNCORRECTED BOUND PROOF

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Daybreak

In the moment of dawn, the song of the centauride: a full-blown horn that rolls over misted grass. The forest is new, the first reaches of sunlight barely caught in the beads of dew that hang from every leaf and every blade. The centauride is down upon her knees in the deepest glen, still dark, and she pounds her fists against the ground to wake the trees, who wake the birds, who wake the world. Morning does not come easy; it does not come free. It comes with a fight – especially in the forests where the moon and her children like to dwell.

1

'Estelle!'

'Yes, Nan?' I try to sound calm, but her voice often sends a little wire of shock through me. She has a knack for catching me just when I'm doing something I know she wouldn't approve of, like using ancient words of magic to make strawberries come in October. I pull a dishcloth over their growing red hearts and turn from the sink as she billows out through the fireplace and swirls in front of me, slowly gathering into her usual shape.

'This house is a mess. When was the last time you dusted?' she asks, brushing at the front of her dress. 'The whole place needs a thorough going-over.'

'*I* think it's OK,' I say, looking around, fingering the silver acorn at my neck. I mean, it's a bit cluttered, and actually I really can't remember the last time I dusted, but I don't mind, and I'm the one *living* here, after all:

Nan's a ghost, and my parents are only distant memories.

Nan was the one who brought me up – with books and gardening, with forest explorations, and adventures through the trees. We spent so many days on the outskirts of the forest, watching the creatures from afar, while she told me their secret ways and warned me never to go beyond our well-trodden paths without her. We tended our orchard and played hopscotch on the crumbling patio by the back door. She made jam sandwiches and told me tricksy tales of fae children and enchanted treasures, of goblins and of the palace locked deep in Winterspell Forest, lost to all, and she taught me how to look after our home. Nan is pretty awesome, but she's been a ghost since before I was born, and it's hard for her to do much these days.

When I was younger, she was a little more solid; she could cook, and she could hold me. But as I got older, she got thinner, and now she mainly hovers over me, making sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing: keeping the herb garden going, harvesting the vegetables, making the jam with the damsons and gooseberries, feeding the chickens. Oh, and learning the old spells that keep us safe here, hidden between the realms of fae and humanity.

She says we belong with neither, not while the Shadow King reigns in Winterspell.

'How's the spell-work coming?' she asks now, hovering over the kitchen table, where the books are heaped in a pile. 'Oh, darling, you should look after these better – some of them are centuries old! Irreplaceable!'

'I know,' I say, shoving them to one side, away from the breakfast honey spill. 'I am doing my best. But it's lonely.' There's a long silence. Her grey eyes stare into mine, unblinking. 'So I wondered if you'd had the chance to think about, um, if it would be OK if I . . . you know . . .' I pull out one of the chairs and drop into it, putting my chin in my hands and staring at Nan, making my eyes as wide as they can go.

'Oh no you don't,' she says with a firm shake of her head, coalescing into the chair opposite mine. 'That trick won't work on me, my dear. The answer is no.'

'*Please*, Nan.' My eyes start to prickle.

'It's just not a good idea, Stella,' she says. 'I'm sorry, but don't you have enough on your plate with looking after this place and your lessons?'

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes – she's afraid for me. We don't go far from the house any more. The forest is forbidden now that she's weaker, and we hide

as much as we can from the real world too. I get it – or at least part of it. The world of magic is not a sparkly love-fest; it's a dark, fickle wilderness. And we know that better than most. Nan's taught me the spells to keep our house protected from the fae, and we have a whole library full of texts on fae and magic, so it is a fairly full-time job, keeping the boundary live and looking after everything else.

But I'm lonely, and I'm tired of hiding. The chores keep me busy, and books keep me company, but it isn't enough. I need people. Friends. The feeling keeps growing, no matter what I do. And so that's at the crux of the campaign I've been waging for the last few weeks. Since I'll never be welcome in the world of the fae, I've decided – I need to be part of the human world. I need human friends.

I want to go to school.

2

The nights are getting longer, now that summer's over, and tonight the moon is hiding behind stubborn clouds. The forest behind the house is thick with the ethereal light of the creatures Nan taught me about, the ones in my favourite books – centaurs and fairies, dryads and goblins, and water sprites who can curse with one flick of their tails. Brambles catch at the silver wire fence hung with charms, which divides the forest from our garden. I pluck a blackberry, checking it over closely before putting it in my mouth.

'Shouldn't have done that,' says Peg, fluttering before me, his red wings a blur.

'It was on our side . . .' I say, savouring the sharp tang of the berry.

'The roots aren't. You'll be corrupted.'

'I'll be fine.'

Peg sniffs. He's an imp, and his favourite form is a

small red bird with a golden beak. Whatever guise he's in, he's very beautiful, very vocal, and regularly very annoying. He's a real stickler for the rules.

He'd be horrified at what I did earlier.

Because I really did it. A shiver of apprehension runs up my spine just at the thought of how I've disobeyed Nan. Peg peers around at me.

'What was that? Are you poisoned?'

'No! I was just thinking about something.'

'Dark thoughts, ominous tidings – it's the berry!'

'It's not the flipping berry! Now go and see what you can find out there . . .'

Peg is Nan's familiar, and nowadays our watch imp; he scouts out the forest for trouble. I mean, there's always trouble, but he'll find out if anything's about to start trouble here. There's a magical boundary, just at the point where our fence divides the garden from the green marshland that leads to Winterspell, and the creatures in the forest don't cross it, but sometimes I hear them at night, faint whispers of parties, the clamour of hoofs, the high-pitched call of fierce, flying things. I've never managed to actually see them from so far away, no matter how many nights I've spent curled up on the cold windowsill, watching.

Our family ruled them all, long ago. We were the kings and queens of fae. But the plaga came when I was two and killed my mother within a day. And my father was lost too – to illness, and to grief. With her dying breath, my mother called Nan back to the world of the living and charged her with bringing me up, safe and well. Nan saw the danger in the forest, and so we fled, and here we are, hiding from the forest, while the Shadow King's legions grow stronger, day by day, fighting with the fae over the fate of Winterspell. We keep to our house, with all our books and wards and spells that apparently protect the rest of the human world from his creeping shadow magic.

When I was small, we ventured into the forest – under Nan's glamour so that none of those creatures could sense us – and we searched for the palace, which is the heart of the Shadow King's power. But we never found it. His darkness has warped the land, made it impossible to find even for us. And every time we went in there, the shadows were harder to hide from; they gathered thick about us, and the fae who fought them had to fight all the harder on those days. So we left. I could see how it upset Nan, to walk away from Winterspell and all the fae, but we only made it worse

for them. We couldn't go very far – her power, the thing that keeps her with me, is tied to the magic in the forest. So we have spent all these years hiding between the forest and the town. Nan used the last of her real magic to glamour the whole house, and us inside it - when I look in the mirror, I am human.

Only, I'm not. It's just that her spell made a shield that disguised me. And it's been there so long that we don't know what I'd look like without it. Every fae is different, and sprites like us have many forms. Would I have horns? A tail? Nan has pointed ears and moon-round silver eyes, but I am a mystery. She says it doesn't matter; that I am Stella, whatever shape I'm in. She says I can find friends in books, and that is true. And we have many, *many* books, so I have spent days and weeks caught up in adventures with the characters between the pages. But the longer I'm here alone, the more I crave my *own* adventures. My own *friend*.

I mean, Peg is a friend, of course. But he's very small and a bit flighty, and he can be pretty superior. I haven't got the courage to tell him yet what I've done. It's going to be a Big Deal.

I phoned the school.

After I talked with Nan and realized she might really never let me go – and that the forest may be out of my reach for as long as I live – I really did it. I checked the perimeter, set the charms swinging, silver sparkling in the low sun all along the fence, and muttered the familiar words Nan taught me that keep the fae and the shadows of Winterspell out of our home – our sanctuary: '*Not mediocris, nor twisting umbra-form, shall pass between these acies, for they mean domum; our domum be our sanctum, free from inimicus be.*'

And then I made the call we've been arguing about for so long.

It wasn't easy. First, I sprinkled salt in a circle around the kitchen table. (If Nan had come back, she'd have known I'd hidden myself from her and Peg on purpose, but I could have just told her I wanted some privacy. She wouldn't have known what I was really doing.) Then I picked up the phone. Put it down. Picked it up again. Dialled. Cursed my shaking fingers and wondered what on earth I was going to say.

'*Broadmere Academy – how may I direct your call?*'

That was as far as I usually got. I'd tried many times . . . and put the phone down. But I had already told my reflection that today was the day, and the face

that looked back at me had beamed with hope and possibility.

'Um. I'm new to the area. And . . . how do I register?'

'*Register?*'

'To come to school.' My cheeks blazed.

'*Oh! Well, usually your parents would apply, through the usual authorities.*'

'Oh.'

Silence. And then a long sigh.

'*One of those, eh. Name?*'

'Estelle. I mean Stella. Stella Briggs.'

'*One minute . . .*' Sound of papers shuffling, a lot more sighing. '*OK. Hold*,' the woman's voice snapped.

The phone line crackled, there was a pipping sound. I stared at the phone. It wasn't really going how I thought it would, so far.

'*And why are your parents not making this call?*'

Well, you see, my mother died long ago from fae plague, and my father didn't die of it, but he did not survive it whole either, so now he haunts Winterspell from his hidden palace, and all his shadows are at war with the fae.

He is the Shadow King, you see.

'Um, it's just my Nan. She's in the other room . . . She said I should do it to . . . teach me independence.'

I winced, crossing my fingers as I realized I should have pretended to be my mum or something. Why do I always have these thoughts too late?

'*How curious*,' the voice said after a short pause. *'Come along in the morning, and perhaps we can sort something out. There are usually various formalities, but I suppose you'll be coming alone? As part of this independence drive?'*

'Ye-es . . .'

'Very well. Tomorrow – 9 a.m. sharp.'

The line went dead. So tomorrow morning, everything will change. Everything has *already* changed, actually; I've never defied Nan before.

I watch Peg flute up into the darkening sky and head back inside, where only shadows greet me. There's a storm building in my chest. Nan appears as I pour hot water into a mug with fresh mint from the garden, but I can't speak, can't even meet her eye right now. She frets around me in a spiral of motion, and I wish she would sit down – a real body in a real chair. I wish she could hold me; that I could feel her paper-soft hands on mine, like I used to. Sometimes, here, my own skin aches for the touch of another human being – even just by accident. A nudge, a flick, anything.

Tomorrow, that might even happen. The storm

inside me becomes a bright spark of hope. I hold my hand up in a silent goodnight as I head upstairs, and she holds hers out to meet it – except, of course, they don't touch.

The Imp

The imp is a master of disguise and can shapeshift at will. Clever, naughty, not entirely trustworthy, they are the preferred familiars of many fae for their ability to spy and their fierce loyalty.

FIGHT – 7
FLIGHT – 10
MAGIC – 10
DISGUISE – 10

3

It's hard to leave in the morning. I stare at myself in the mirror for a moment, thinking of Nan's old glamour spell and whether there are features I should be hiding, but I can't see anything out of the ordinary: brown hair, brown eyes, round face. Me.

I huff at myself and flit down the stairs, hastily undoing charms to get out of the door and the gate, then whispering the familiar words to restore them behind me. Then I charge off down the lane on my own, for the first time, while Peg flutters and spirals over my head demanding to know what I'm doing, chirping about duties and responsibilities. He's so panicked, it would be easier – kinder – just to forget the whole thing.

But if I do that now, it'll never happen. I'll just spend my whole life trapped in the house. I look back at our home, glowing pink in the early morning light, nestled between folds in the foothills that lead to Cloudfell