
NETTLE
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Nettle

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One

Once there was a girl called Nettle. She was all things wild, with a sting to boot. At night she dreamed of silver bells singing her name.

Once there was a girl called Nettle. She was all things prickly and untamed. Voices whispered to her from the darkness.

Once there was a girl called Nettle. She was all things dangerous and laced with magic. The faeries stole her away to their world.

Once there was a girl called Nettle. And that girl was me.

*

It wasn't always my name, I used to have another. But it didn't belong to me.

The first time my grandma found me lying in a patch of nettles, she dragged me out by my hair, tangled like

a thorny thicket even then, and frantically checked my bare arms and legs for any sign of a rash. When she found none, she'd looked at me, bewildered.

'They didn't hurt you?' In her surprise, her words almost sounded like an accusation. I'd shaken my head and we'd gone inside for lemonade.

The second time, she'd been calmer, yet I saw panic in her eyes.

The third time she asked me why I kept doing it, why I kept lying among the green leaves. I remember my answer so clearly.

Because I feel safe there.

And from that day forward, no one ever called me anything else. Nettle was my name and my nature.

'You know why they grow?' Grandma would ask when I played among the coarse stalks. 'Because the faeries are near. The threshold between our two worlds, that thin veil that keeps us separated, is marked by nettles. They warn us and protect us.'

I think she thought the name would protect me too.

Or perhaps she simply hoped.

*

Our little cottage was as crooked as they came. Perched on a hill that had open moorland in one direction and dense forest in the other, it gave us everything we needed. Enough land to grow food, to graze animals. A world

that was entirely ours, created by my grandma to make me happy.

It had always been just the two of us, living in nature's embrace. When I was younger, I'd once asked about my parents, more curious about their absence than anything else, but the blood had drained from Grandma's face and concern had clouded her eyes. Then she had swept me into her arms and joked that only the faeries could have left such a child behind. I had beamed and tucked the thought away, letting it rise whenever I sought comfort for being different from the children in the village.

Grandma was my tutor as well as my guardian. 'Schools don't teach you about what really matters,' she would say, but we both knew that wasn't why she kept me home. The village whispers were far from quiet. We heard them well enough. I didn't care though, it simply meant I never had to leave her, and between letters and numbers, Grandma taught me to understand the trees, the flowers, the weeds. She showed me how to weave baskets from willow, to turn sloes to wine, to use heather as a natural dye. I would roam the moors and collect sheep's fleece from the barbed wire fencing, watching as she washed, then carded my finds, before sitting, mesmerised, at her feet as she fed it into her spinning wheel, transforming it to yarn. She raised me on a diet of botany, crafts and most importantly, myth.

To her, faery lore was as real as history and oh, how I adored listening to her stories of rival courts, gowns spun from shadow, endless dancing beneath scarlet stars. A place of danger and deception but more beauty than I could dare imagine. Yet for all the reverence with which she spoke about the fae and their world, her warnings were not to be ignored. *Do not venture into the forest. Ignore the voices on the wind. Stay on the moorland paths and stray for nothing.*

The fierce blaze in her eyes when she'd held me by my shoulders and issued these rules had burned through me and I'd heeded them as if they were the laws of nature itself.

How I wished her eyes would glow like that now. She hadn't opened them since yesterday, her breath rattling in her chest. I held her hand tightly in my own.

'Please, Grandma,' I said. 'Let me call the doctor again.'

She shook her head, barely a fraction. No more doctors. We'd already had this conversation before she'd deteriorated.

There's nothing more they can do. That anyone can do.

There was something I could do though, something to offer her a morsel of comfort. I lifted her hand and pressed it to my cheek.

'Once many long moons ago and beneath a starry sky, the king and queen of the faery realms pledged their love to one another and united their two kingdoms.

Such a joyous union demanded the most lavish of feasts, and all the fae-folk joined the celebration, delighting in the endless dishes of sugared fruits and pastries so light they practically floated into hungry mouths. Goblets overflowed with the sweetest wines and all the world was merriment.

'When they'd had their fill at the banquet table, the king and queen declared there should be music. And so there was, the most mellifluous music ever heard, and the revellers watched in wonder as the bride and groom spun in each other's arms. The pair vowed fidelity and trust, and above all pledged to forever keep peace in their lands.'

I paused. This was my grandma's favourite of all her many faery stories, one filled with love and joy, but tonight it seemed to be causing her more distress than solace.

'What is it?' I asked softly. 'Do you want me to tell you a different one?'

A tear trailed over her cheek towards her ear. 'I'm sorry,' she said, a sob that I scarcely caught.

'You have nothing to be sorry for,' I said, kissing the papery skin of her hand. 'Nothing at all.'

'Because of me, you never danced beneath the stars.'

'Then you've not been paying attention,' I said with a smile. 'Because I dance out there most nights.'

'Alone.' Another tear slid from her eye. 'And when I'm gone, you'll have no one.'

'You're still here,' I reminded her. 'You don't have to worry about me.'

I stayed with her until she fell into a fretful sleep and then made my way through the quiet house, down the narrow stairs. There were chores for me to do before going to bed and I set about them in an attempt to suppress the growing dread that swelled in my chest.

I didn't want to think about what my grandma had said, didn't want to imagine my life without her in it. And yet it was becoming harder to ignore.

She was right. I would be alone.

There were no friends to lean on. When I was younger, I had briefly been befriended by some of the village girls, who fell in love with our world on the hill. They adored riding my pony, feeding the ducks, plucking ripe raspberries from the canes. Their parents approved of them playing outside, even if they raised an eyebrow because I was filthy compared to their daughters. They would never have been permitted to roam the moors alone in the moonlight or bring abandoned fox cubs home to raise. For a time, all was well. Until I started to tell them about the faeries.

They hadn't heard any of Grandma's stories before, so I shared my favourites. I explained how they should leave gifts for the faeries, to show respect. The creamy top of the milk and bread dipped in honey, placed on

the doorstep on a frosty morning. A drizzle of wine poured across the ground. A pebble decorated with a colourful pattern.

When they all wanted a token to offer the faeries, I made up tiny bundles for them to take home, twigs, dried flowers and rodent bones tied with a pretty hair ribbon. I was so proud of those little gifts, imagining how happy the faeries would be to receive them.

The parents, however, did not share my excitement – apparently, bones weren't appropriate for children. After that the girls stopped coming to play, and when I ventured to the village in search of company, the friends who had once danced with me turned away.

They laughed as I wandered barefoot along the pavement, recoiled when a spider crawled from my hair and scuttled down my arm so I could rehome it in a hedgerow. They shouted names at me as I bowed in reverence to the trees I passed. To begin with their taunts hurt and so I cheered myself up by playing tricks on them. I left baskets of toffee apples on their doorsteps – only beneath the caramel was raw onion. Then donuts – filled with mayonnaise instead of custard. One girl had chickens in her back garden, and so I slipped in early before the morning sun and switched half the fresh eggs for smooth brown rocks.

Soon I had fully established a reputation for being a troublemaker, but I realised I didn't care what any of

those people thought of me. I had Grandma. I didn't need anyone else.

'And I have you,' I said to my chickens as I ushered them back to the safety of their coop for the night. The door of their henhouse was loose, so I took my penknife from my pocket, using it as a makeshift screwdriver to fix the hinge.

Once they were secure, I rounded up the runner ducks, before heading to the orchard to catch Bracken and Moss. The days of chasing them round the field were long gone, both my pony and his donkey companion far too old to do much more than plod. The lure of the warm stables was irresistible to them.

As I walked through the chill of the evening air, a breeze whipped up, carrying a whisper to me.

Nettle.

The voice was not unfamiliar. I'd heard it calling my name for as long as I could remember, a twilight lament heralding the coming darkness. I'd never told Grandma, not after the way she'd reacted when I'd mentioned I dreamed of bells, their eerie melody seeming to ring my name. She rarely raised her voice, but her frightened rebuke then had stung as though she'd struck me.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose as the breeze intensified, before dying away. I stood for a moment, almost dizzy with disquiet, before I gathered myself and carried on to the orchard, where Bracken and Moss waited patiently for me at the gate.

'You're a disgrace to your ancestors,' I told Bracken as I bolted the stable door shut. 'Honestly, you wouldn't last five minutes on the moor.'

Grandma had bought him for me at the market when I was little. He was getting on a bit even then, but I'd spent more hours of my childhood with him than anyone else. Galloping across the moorland on a native pony was magical.

He nuzzled my arm, expectantly. 'You're spoiled, do you know that?' I asked, taking an apple from my pocket and slicing it in half. As he took the fruit, I stroked his nose affectionately and tried not to let my mind wander towards morbid thoughts. Like Grandma, Bracken wouldn't be with me forever.

With a last check that he had all he needed, I gave Moss the other half of the apple, and satisfied he was comfortable too, went to fill the watering cans outside.

As I was leaving the barn, the pile of old horseshoes caught my eye. Grandma was as superstitious as she was devout to the old ways. Hawthorn was forbidden in the house, white heather and bluebells must never be picked, and on Midsummer's Eve all the mirrors were covered for fear a glimpse at our reflection on such a night would allow the faeries to steal us away. She needn't have bothered, I rarely paused to study myself in a looking glass. I knew what I would see: a permanently pale complexion, no matter how many hours spent in the sun; sharp features that falsely suggested a talent for

cunning; hazel eyes, each with a circle of green flecks like a spring wreath; wild not-quite-black, not-quite-brown hair.

We kept the horseshoes both for good luck and to guard the house and stables from roaming evil – they hung over every external doorway. It occurred to me as I stared at them that there could be no harm in putting another above my grandma's bed. She needed all the help she could get, so I picked the nicest-looking and slipped it into one of my pockets. While I liked to imagine myself in elaborate faery gowns of silk that dazzled like stardust, I opted for loose, practical dresses instead. I sewed my own from linen and ensured they had deep pockets for occasions such as this.

As I rounded the shed, my dress caught on a nail and ripped.

I cursed. This was my newest one, but I guessed having to repair it was some sort of clothing rite-of-passage. Heaven forbid I own something not torn and endlessly mended.

Once the garden was watered, both flower and vegetable patches, I headed to my favourite place: the unkempt border of our land at the bottom of the hill, which marked the place where the wilderness ended and our haven began. It was here the nettles grew, in dense clumps. I waded through them and settled myself among the green leaves, their hairs tickling me harmlessly. The purpose of having such roomy pockets

in my dress was so that I could carry necessities with me at all times, saving me from traipsing in and out of the house. A small sewing kit absolutely fell under that category and I pulled it out, swiftly setting about the repair.

The light was fading fast, and I knew what Grandma would say if she saw me.

You'll ruin your eyes doing that in such poor light.

It never bothered me. Working by the sun or moon was all the same, my keen eyes adjusting well to the shift. And honestly? I enjoyed basking in the moon's caress, pretending it was silvery starlight I stitched through my material rather than common thread.

When my dress was fixed, I lay flat to gaze at the night sky. I should go back to the house, check Grandma didn't need anything, get some sleep before another day began. But I'd made a mistake. I'd stopped. Keeping going was the only thing that had prevented the shadows from invading my mind.

The truth could no longer be ignored. Grandma was going to die. I would have no one. Much as I enjoyed my own company, craved independence and cherished the land we lived on, the prospect of losing her left an aching hollow in my chest.

'Please,' I begged the gathering darkness. 'Please don't let her die.'

My fingers trailed across the nettles before clenching them in my fists, sorrow and rage entwined.

'Please.' My plea came from the deepest part of me.

The faint ringing of bells carried through the dusk. The same sound I heard in my dreams. *The call of the faeries*, my grandma had said. *Don't listen to it*, she'd warned. *Turn away from the sound*.

She feared them, but I feared losing her more.

Clutching the nettles more tightly, I closed my eyes. 'If you can save her, I'll do anything.'

The bells rang louder, the wind whipped wildly, my untamed locks dancing to its tune. And my whole world fell away.

Two

Falling. Flying. Fast and fleeting. A directionless movement that made my head spin.

When at last it stopped, I opened my eyes.

I no longer recognised the sky above me. It was violet, a fitting backdrop for the two vast moons, one crimson, the other silver, that held court over the myriad scarlet stars.

Blinking did nothing to disperse the scene. Wherever I was, it wasn't my garden.

Scrambling to my feet, I realised the only thing that was the same was the nettle patch that surrounded me. The hill and my home were gone, and though a forest loomed beside me, and open moorland stretched the other way, there was scant resemblance to the landscape I'd grown up in. Panic burned like bile in my throat.

'Grandma?' I called, though it was hopeless. 'Grandma!' Silence was my only reply. Wherever I was,

she was far from my reach. I had to get back to her. She was too ill to be left alone, what would happen when she woke and I wasn't there? What if she died without me by her side to breathe well wishes for her onward journey? What if I never saw her again?

Such thoughts nearly paralysed me. If I was to find my way home though, I needed to push them somewhere deep inside where they couldn't hinder me. And I *had* to find my way home.

The obvious thing to do was to reverse what had been done. I lay back in the nettles and closed my eyes.

'Please.' I fought to keep my voice steady. 'Let me go home.' I grasped the nettles, trying to replicate what I'd done before. But there were no bells. No whispers. The ground did not move and I remained where I was.

Was it possible? Could I have been heard by the fae folk? Had I really fallen into another world?

'You fool,' I muttered. Had I not had enough warnings? What was I thinking calling to the fae?

Nettle.

The voice drifted softly from the forest. The same one I'd heard not that long ago at home. Here it had a very different effect, swirling around me, settling possessively onto my skin. It acted like a siren's call, drawing me towards the treeline. I stumbled forwards, desperate to hear it again.

The sound of thundering hooves broke the strange enchantment, bringing me to my senses. Galloping

fast towards me were half a dozen horses with eyes like blood diamonds, their flowing manes reaching almost to their knees, so that their riders had knotted stirrups into the hair. They had no tack, the warriors riding bareback holding weapons rather than reins. But it was their bared teeth, filed to lethal points that made me run. The forest might have the whispering voice, but I would take that over the terrifying horses and hollering riders pounding my way.

It was futile, of course. I could not possibly outrun such creatures, and they soon overtook me, rearing to a halt and blocking my path to the relative sanctuary of the forest. The riders were even more fearsome up close, the eerie red light bouncing off their hairless heads and illuminating their ears, which were as pointed as their teeth.

'Stop, spy,' they growled, aiming spears made of carved bone at my face.

I raised my hands in self-defence or surrender. I didn't know which. 'I'm no spy,' I gasped, fighting to keep my voice steady. 'I'm just lost.'

The strange sound they made might have been laughter; it was impossible to tell. 'Save your lies for the king,' their leader said.

'I'm not lying, all I want is to go home,' I promised.

The riders hissed in anger.

'To report back to the queen? Never!' Another of the warriors closed in on me, his eyes flashing with fury. 'You're coming with us.'

I had no choice, that much was obvious, but it didn't stop me kicking and screaming as the rider grabbed my arm in his claw-like fingers and hauled me up onto the horse in front of him, so that I lay on my stomach as we set off at a pace faster than anything Bracken had ever managed.

Frantically, I tried to snatch at air, but it was hard to fill my lungs in such a position, the ground flying past so swiftly I had to close my eyes to ease the sickness. *Think*, I urged myself. Whoever these riders were, it sounded like they were taking me to see their king. Perhaps he would be able to help me – once I had convinced him I wasn't a spy, or whatever else they thought I was. If I wasn't dreaming, if I really *had* fallen into another realm, then I had to remember everything Grandma had ever told me – and hope her stories were right. Only hours ago, I'd told her the tale of the faery king and queen's wedding – was it possible I was on my way to their court now?

Twisting my head, I tried to see where we were going… but there was nothing beyond open moorland. My heart sank. I didn't think I could bear to go much further like this. Then I caught a glimpse of something ahead and shifted my weight to get a better look. Tiny buds formed on the horizon, growing into mounds as we approached at impossible speed, until rolling hillsides loomed before us. Glittering rivers cascaded down some, ancient forests sprawled across others, but they

couldn't draw my gaze away from the palace perched on the highest hill. It was a black silhouette against the violet night sky, all thin towers and pointed turrets, but it bewitched me nevertheless. Clusters of scarlet stars burst above it like fireworks released to celebrate our arrival. Beneath it, a town spread like rambling roots seeking to anchor the palace in place.

That was where we were going. My fingers wound instinctively in the horse's mane, clinging on as it covered the ground faster than should have been possible.

Soon we were ascending the hills, weaving along an invisible path towards the outskirts of the town. Then we flew past stone walls, a blur of huts and buildings, and all the while the distant clamour grew louder, until it drowned the thunder of the horses' hooves.

'The Night Riders are here!'

The shout rose over the noise, and I tried to look about as the horses slowed to a brisk trot.

We had reached the heart of the bustling town, the crowd parting for the horses as we rode along cobbled streets, illuminated by many lanterns. The smells were intoxicating, floral perfumes and spices blended with earthiness and wood. The smoky scent of roasting chestnuts mingled with the coppery tang of sizzling meat. Behind the throng of voices, music was playing, so giddy and infectious that even in my precarious situation, my feet began to move in time to the rhythm.

It was as busy as if it was daytime, but we weren't here to purchase food or wares. The horses continued to climb towards the stone walls beyond the market, and as the incline levelled, we reached a grand gateway that looked at first to be made of pale wrought iron, but then I realised it was antlers twisted and bound by creeping ivy.

The gates opened to permit us entrance and, to my great relief, the horses came to a halt. I was pulled from my uncomfortable position and faltered as my feet touched the ground, only staying upright because the rider who'd captured me gripped my arms so tightly.

'This way,' he said, pushing me forwards, as I took in the sight before me.

The palace.

Up close, it was even more magical, and my breath caught in my throat. It was an impossible structure, formed of trees and roots, boughs and branches, moss and lichen, stone and bone, leaves and berries. It looked as alive as any creature, but strong and ancient. Above the entrance, sinister faces of gnarled wood watched our approach. It was simultaneously threatening and ethereal, and left me in no doubt.

I truly was in the land of the faeries.

The Night Riders escorted me through a gorse archway and into a corridor carpeted with spongy heather, which led to the throne room. Skeletal trees stripped of bark shaped the room, towering to offer support to a canopy of hanging wild clematis. Roots

erupted from the ground to provide an entwined base for the vast granite throne, and my eyes slowly rose to take in the exquisite man sitting upon it.

His trousers were made of leather and stitched with silver leaves, his arms covered by tendrils and ivy that seemed to grow from his skin. His chest was bare, as smooth as polished marble yet glittering like starlight. Pointed ears poked through the long black hair that hung past his shoulders, framing his perfect features. Strong jaw, high cheekbones, piercing eyes. Upon his head sat a crown of hawthorn twigs, shaped to give the appearance of many antlers, reminiscent of the gateway, and decorated with moss and lichen, sparkling with dewdrops.

He sniffed the air and his expression turned to one of disgust.

'You dare bring a human into my presence?' Even outraged, his voice was alluring, deep and melodic. 'I will not look on her.'

I waited for the Night Riders to respond, but nothing happened. Then I realised the king hadn't been addressing them, but countless spiders, which were now descending from the branches framing the ceiling. They were the size of thimbles, silver-white and ghost-like and, as they dropped, a skein of finest web fell upon my head covering my face. To my surprise, I could see clearly through the silky gauze as the Night Riders shoved me closer to the throne. The veil obviously

served some purpose, because the king deigned to look at me directly.

'What possible reason could you have for bringing *this* before me?' he asked the Night Riders. Disdain dripped from his voice.

'Found her near the border, Your Majesty,' the Night-Rider leader replied. 'She was running back towards the forest.'

'A spy,' the king said, an edge to his voice. 'What shall we do with her?'

Murmurs echoed off the walls of the hall as if it was filled with people.

'Burn her!'

'Torture her!'

'Sacrifice!'

The words were brimming with gleeful venom, each a tiny prick to my skin, and I knew if I didn't say something quickly, I was going to be punished as some kind of traitor.

'I'm not a spy!' I shouted, silencing the cruel chorus.

The king tilted his head, cat-like, eyes burning with incredulity.

'You dare speak without my permission?'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'It's just it sounded like you were going to kill me and I'd really rather not die, especially for something I haven't done.'

There was a collective holding of breath as the Night Riders waited to see what response my outburst

would receive. Had I sealed my fate rather than saving myself?

The king rose to his feet and came down from his throne, his presence more intimidating with every step. When he was an arm's length away, he stopped, as if not wanting to be any closer to me. 'Do you know how fortunate you are still to draw breath, mortal? I despise your kind, and though the spiders' work protects me from having to look upon you, it will not protect you. So answer me once and for all, what are you?'

'I'm no-one. I was in my garden, lying in a bed of nettles, pleading to anyone who would listen to save my grandmother and then I fell and found myself here. This is all a terrible mistake and I want to go home.' The words spilled out, catching in my throat as fear and exhaustion threatened to overwhelm me.

His dark eyes shone with unexpected emotion. 'Keita,' he breathed, his voice tinged with sadness. When he spoke again, any trace of sorrow was gone. 'She must have heard your cry and summoned you. She always did have an inexplicable fondness for your kind. Tell me, what did my queen say?'

It was hard to pay attention to his words, the timbre of his voice so beguiling.

'I heard only bells.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Bells?' With a discerning gaze, he walked slowly around me. 'You are hiding something. Tell me.'

'I'm not,' I insisted. 'Truly.'

My answer disappointed him. 'Take her away.'

'No!'

The Night Riders grabbed my arms and started to pull me away. My heart pounded in my chest, I had to do something. 'Wait, please! I have to go home, I'll do anything.'

The second time tonight I'd offered such a ridiculous promise. It hadn't worked out well before.

The king raised his hand and the Night Riders released me. He beckoned me to approach, signalling when I was close enough. His expression had changed, every feature calculating, and I imagined this was how my chickens felt in the face of a cunning fox about to steal into their coop.

'Anything?' he asked.

What choice did I have? I had nowhere to run. 'All I want is to save my grandma and go home to her. So yes, I will do anything for that to happen.'

The light that burned in his eyes betrayed any attempt at casual indifference. He was a hunter who had perfectly cornered his prey.

'What you ask is simple enough,' he said. 'With a mere click of my fingers I can grant what you desire. But not for nothing.' His eyes flickered to mine, and although I knew he could not see them, I felt their intense scrutiny nonetheless. 'Complete three tasks for me and I shall give you what you ask.'

So many stories Grandma had told me involved faeries making deals with humans, which were never wise and always dangerous. But hope rose within me at his words.

'You really can heal her? And I can return to her?'

The king nodded. 'If you complete my three tasks. You need only give your word for the contract to be binding, so tell me human, do we have a deal?'

My instincts screamed at me not to be enticed by such temptation, but… Grandma. I would do anything for her.

'We have a deal.'

'Well then,' he said, 'welcome to my court. I am Locryn, King of the Moorland and you are now in my service.'