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R.J. Anderson

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prologue

The Queen is dying.

The knowledge sat in Linden's belly like a cold stone as she hunched over the tub of greasy water, scrubbing her thirty-ninth plate. She'd promised Mallow, the Chief Cook, that she'd wash all the Oakenfolk's dishes in exchange for a second piece of honey cake at dinner, and at the time it had seemed a reasonable bargain. But now that she knew what was happening at the top of the Spiral Stair – that the faery Queen was lying pale and weak upon her bed and might never rise from it again – she wanted to heave up all the cake she'd eaten and throw the last few dishes straight back in the Chief Cook's face.

How could Mallow look smug, after bringing them such terrible news? The moment she'd spoken those words the whole kitchen had gone silent, Gatherers and cooks and scullions all staring in horrified disbelief. Yet the corners of Mallow's fat mouth were curled up in obvious self-

satisfaction, as though the important thing wasn't Queen Amaryllis's fate, only that she'd been the first of them to find out about it.

Still, Linden didn't dare to question Mallow, or beg her for more details – unless, of course, she was prepared to bargain for the information. The other faeries in the kitchen must have thought the same, for they'd already gone back to work, downcast faces and trembling hands their only signs of emotion. But Linden could imagine the anxious thoughts running through their minds, because the same fears chilled her own:

How much longer can the Queen live?

Who will rule the Oak now?

And most of all: *Oh, Great Gardener, what will become of us when she's gone?*

Linden bowed her head over the tub until her long brown curls almost brushed the water. She squeezed her eyes shut and her lips together, trying not to weep. To be brave, like her foster mother Knife had taught her – but oh, she wished that Knife could be with her now!

"Don't forget these," said Mallow's voice from behind her, and a silver tray clattered onto the counter by Linden's side. "Not that *she's* eaten much, so be sure to scrape them first."

In Mallow's language *scrape them* really meant *save all the good bits for me*. Linden looked at the almost untouched

food – a plate of delicately carved roast finch with mashed roots and roasted chestnut dressing – and felt sick all over again. If the Queen couldn't even muster the will to eat, how would she find the strength to do magic? If the spells that protected the Oak weren't renewed on a daily basis they would start to weaken, and then it wouldn't take long for disease, insects and a host of hungry predators to start gnawing their way inside…

"Someone else can wash the Queen's dishes, Mallow," said a calm voice from the doorway. "Her Majesty wishes me to bring Linden to her at once."

Linden looked up, her tears draining into the backs of her eyes as she recognised the tall, grave-looking faery who had spoken. "Me, Valerian? Why?"

But Mallow spoke up before Valerian could answer. "Linden made me a bargain, Healer. *You* can wait."

Someone gasped, but quickly turned it into a cough as Mallow swung round. "Stop gawping and get back to work!" she barked, then turned her glare back on Linden. "Well?"

Anger surged through Linden, and she clenched her soap-slick hands. It was one thing for Mallow to bully her own kitchen workers, or a temporary servant like Linden herself. But to be rude to Valerian – worse, to deny a request from their own dying Queen – it was intolerable.

Yet what could she do about it? At fourteen Linden was by far the youngest faery in the Oak, and one of the smallest besides. She had no magic, no influence, not even a proper

occupation yet: it was ridiculous to think she could stand up to someone like Mallow. Linden swallowed, nodded, and began removing the uneaten food from the Queen's plate.

"No," said Valerian, walking over. She took the plate from Linden, gently but firmly, and set it aside. "Her Majesty is not dead yet, Mallow. And even among faeries, there are duties more sacred than a bargain." She bent and looked into Linden's face with her searching grey eyes. "The Queen has need of you. Will you come with me?"

Not commanding, but asking: that was Valerian's way. And yet that simple courtesy was enough to straighten Linden's spine, making her ashamed that she had bowed to Mallow for even a moment.

"Yes, of course," she said. "I'll come at once."

The Queen's apartments were nine floors up, at the top of the Spiral Stair. Through the window-slit on the landing Linden could see a rare view of the whole Oakenwyld: on the east side a matted brown carpet of meadow fringed with leafless trees, and to the north and west the withered hedges and empty flowerbeds that separated the Oak from the nearby human House. Drab though it looked now, in just a few weeks the garden would be glorious – but what did that matter, when the Queen would likely not live long enough to see it? With a heavy heart Linden closed the shutter and turned away.

"There is one thing I must tell you," said Valerian quietly

as she climbed up onto the landing beside Linden. "If we should meet Bluebell on our way, let me be the one to speak. And however she may press you afterwards, tell her nothing about your meeting with the Queen."

Bluebell was Queen Amaryllis's personal attendant, a haughty but loyal faery who had served her for over seventy years. "Why?" Linden asked.

"Think, child. How do you think the news came out that Her Majesty is dying? If Bluebell would gossip about such a serious matter – and to Mallow, no less – then I fear she cannot be trusted with even the least of Queen Amaryllis's secrets any more."

Sobered, Linden nodded her agreement, and the Healer parted the curtains and led the way inside. A distant bell jangled, and Linden braced herself for a confrontation – but mercifully Bluebell seemed to be elsewhere for the moment, and they walked down the corridor unchallenged.

The Queen's bedchamber was the most elegant room Linden had ever seen. Carvings of vines and berries surrounded every door and window frame, all the furnishings were antique, and the floor was carpeted in ermine, a white pelt thick and soft enough to bury Linden's bare feet to the ankles. But the moment Linden saw Queen Amaryllis, she forgot everything else.

She had the face of a goddess, untouched by age, and yet her half-lidded eyes held the burden of centuries. No faery could expect to live much beyond three hundred and fifty,

and Amaryllis had passed that age seven years ago. Now all the warmth had drained from her skin, leaving it white as apple flesh, and she lay in the four-poster bed with her wings flattened beneath her, as though she already knew that she would never use them again.

"Your Majesty," said Valerian, dipping a curtsy. "I have brought Linden, as you asked."

The faery in the bed stirred, and her faded blue eyes focused upon them. "Good," she breathed. "Come close to me, both of you."

Valerian walked around one side of the bed, while Linden moved woodenly to the other. She couldn't speak, even if she had known what to say: she could only look down at the Queen's honey-gold hair lying tangled on the pillow, and gulp back the grief that threatened to choke her.

"I had hoped you would be older when this day came," the Queen murmured. "But I cannot delay it any longer, even for your sake." She extended one soft, fragile hand, her fingers curling around Linden's. "It is time you learned what your task must be, and how carefully we have prepared you for just such a time as this. For you are our people's greatest hope – perhaps our only hope."

A tremor ran through Linden as she realised that she was about to receive her life's occupation at last. But the Oakenfolk's *greatest hope*…What could Her Majesty possibly mean?

"Do not fear," said the Queen, but her voice thinned to

huskiness on the final word, and though she cleared her throat she could not speak again. There was a painful pause, until Valerian spoke instead:

"Let me try to explain. By now, Linden, you must know about the Sundering, the curse that robbed our people of their magic nearly two hundred years ago. Wink has told you the story, I am sure?"

Wink was the second of Linden's two foster mothers, a little red-headed faery full of affection and good intentions, but unfortunately bad at getting to the point. "Some of it," said Linden cautiously. "I know the spell was cast by a faery named Jasmine." She'd seen a portrait of Jasmine once: a strong-featured beauty with sleek black hair and a mocking smile curving her lips. She'd looked proud and very determined – the sort of woman who might do anything. "And I know it was because she wanted to keep us away from humans."

"Yes," said Valerian. "Jasmine believed that our reliance on the human world for new ideas and creative skills was mere laziness and habit. She thought that if she could make it possible for us to replace ourselves magically when we died, instead of taking human mates or adopting unwanted human children as our own, we would soon learn to thrive without any human contact at all. But she was wrong."

Wrong was an understatement, Linden knew. In Jasmine's day there had been more than two hundred faeries living in the Oak, but once they lost their magic so

many had been killed by predators and other misfortunes that only forty-five Oakenfolk now remained.

"I understand," she said. "But what does this have to do with me?"

"We need our magic back," Valerian said simply. "Queen Amaryllis cannot endure much longer, and once she is gone the rest of us will soon perish unless we find a way to undo Jasmine's spell. Our only hope is to seek out other faeries who still have all their magic, and beg them to lend us some of their power. But how could any of us undertake such a long and dangerous journey, when we have so little idea where to go, and still less chance of getting there?"

It was a good question: at their small size and with no magic to protect them, none of their people could possibly survive long outside the Oak. Linden frowned – then her face cleared as she realised what the Healer must have in mind. "You want me to talk to Knife for you?" she said. "Of course I will – but surely there's no need. She'd do it if you asked her, I know she would."

But the Queen looked pained, and Valerian shook her head. "We have no doubt of your foster-mother's loyalty, or her courage. But she is human now, no longer one of us, and it is unlikely that any faeries outside our own Wyld would speak to her. Besides, it is Knife's duty to guard the Oakenwyld against crows and foxes, and provide food for our people. She cannot go."

No, of course not, thought Linden regretfully. Especially

not with Queen Amaryllis so close to dying, and the Oak more vulnerable than ever.

"But Knife has already done much to help," Valerian continued. "The time you have spent with her in the House, learning of humans and their ways, has given you a unique understanding of the world beyond the Oak. If the opportunity arises for one of our people to venture out in search of other faeries, no one is better equipped for the task than you."

Shock froze Linden's blood in her veins, then set her whole body afire. "Me? But I'm so…"

So small. So weak. So frightened. She wasn't like Knife, who even as a faery had been tough enough to take down a crow with a single arrow and fight off rats bare-handed. Linden had no fighting skills, and no magic either: how could she possibly do what they were asking of her?

The Healer's face softened. "This is difficult for you, I know. But rest assured, we have not made this decision lightly. Nor does Her Majesty intend to send you out into the world without first giving you all the help she can." She bent towards the Queen and said in a low voice, "Do you wish to do it now? Are you sure you will not rest a little first, and gather your strength?"

Amaryllis's reply was barely audible, exhaled on a ragged breath. "Yes…it must be now."

Valerian bowed her head. "Then I will not oppose you. I only pray that Linden and I will prove worthy of such a sacrifice."

Sacrifice? What in the Great Gardener's name was Queen Amaryllis planning to do? Linden's anxiety must have shown on her face, because the Queen's fingers tightened around her own, reassuring. Then she whispered: "Do you give me your service?"

Linden's eyes welled up, but she bit her lips and nodded. Fearful or not, she still trusted the Queen, believed in her – even though what she was asking seemed impossible.

"Dear child," Amaryllis murmured. "You have been the joy of my old age. I wish I could go with you, when the time comes. But since I cannot…" and with those words a silvery glow kindled above her heart, and began to radiate outwards. Dim at first, but growing brighter as it spread, it rippled down the Queen's outspread arms to her fingertips – and before Linden could so much as gasp, the light enveloped her as well.

She could feel the magic all around her, dancing sparks against her skin: she looked wide-eyed at Valerian, and saw the Healer surrounded by the same eerie glow. Linden started, but Amaryllis held her fast, and the light expanded until the three of them were enveloped in a swirling, incandescent bubble.

"*Half my magic I give to you, my ambassador,*" the Queen's voice echoed in Linden's mind, clear as only thoughts could be. "*Yours are the glamours, the spells of illusion and temporary change. At need, they will conceal you from your enemies and confound those who would do you harm. But use them wisely*

and in good conscience, not for selfish gain."

"Your Majesty – " protested Linden, but the Queen had already turned to Valerian.

"*And you, my chosen successor…you have always had the heart of a Healer; soon you must bear the burdens of a Queen as well. To you I give the Sight, to counsel you when your own wisdom is not enough, and I give you also the deep magics of protection and preservation, that the Oak might not wither before help is found. I only regret that I cannot give you more…"* And with that the light around her died away, and her arms fell limp to the mattress.

"Your Majesty!" cried Linden in distress, but Valerian held a finger to her lips.

"She is not dead, only exhausted. But she has given us all the magic she had – look."

She lifted the coverlet, and grief stabbed Linden as she saw that the Queen's wings, once the most bright and beautiful of all the faeries', had completely disappeared.

"How long will she…" Linden could not bring herself to finish the sentence.

"It will not be long now," replied Valerian, drawing the blankets back up around the Queen's shoulders.

Linden rubbed her arms, which still tingled from the Queen's magic – no, it was *her* magic now; she could feel it glowing deep inside her, like a banked fire. But how to use it? She knew so little about spell-craft, she was afraid to even try.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"I do not know," Valerian admitted. "You are still too young to undertake your quest, and even if you were not, you will need human help to travel any great distance."

"You think they're far away, then? The other faeries?"

"I believe so," said Valerian. "If they were nearby, we would surely have found them by now. Queen Amaryllis thinks that some may live among the humans, even passing for human themselves, as we Oakenfolk used to do before the Sundering. Perhaps in the great city they call London…"

London. It sounded almost like her name. A sign, perhaps? Could this be the Great Gardener's way of showing her where to go?

"But as I said," Valerian added with more firmness, "you are young. The Queen's gift of magic has bought us time, and there is no need to send you away, not yet."

Linden looked down at her bare feet, brown against the white fur of the carpet. Valerian might think they could afford to wait, but she had no such confidence. Already the glamours that wrapped the Oak were weakening, exposing its doors and windows to human sight, and the wards that kept the tree safe from predators would soon fail as well.

By working together she and Valerian could perhaps renew the faltering spells, and Knife would surely do her Hunter's best to keep the Oakenfolk safe and fed. But at best those were temporary solutions. There would be no security and no future for any of them until they had their magic back.

Linden knew she was young. But the Queen had given her an occupation – *my ambassador* – which meant she was no longer a child. And though the idea of going out into the world alone made cold worms crawl beneath her skin, neither could she bear to think of sitting idle while her people were in danger.

There was no telling when the opportunity for her to leave the Oak would arise. But in the silence of her heart, Linden vowed that when it came, she would be ready.