morning glory

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by cloudycats

Summary

Stella says, “Chise, have you heard the phrase *sleih beggey* before?”

Stella has a talk with Chise, and then with Ashen Eyes.

Silky doesn't take gifts, but she accepts tools that let her make presents for other people. She receives the bag of patterned yarn from Stella with a smile and a hug (Stella bought it from a specialty shop in London, figuring Silky might appreciate a variety she can't easily find in the countryside), presses a dipping biscuit and a mug of chocolate on her, and then directs her to the back garden.

Chise looks up from the pumpkins as the door swings open. “Stella!” She stands hurriedly and slips the dirt-stained gloves off. The left hand she reveals shows unmarred black, the color of the lightless spaces in dreams. Beneath the sun, it gleams in patterns like scales. *Magical accident*, Chise explained when Stella asked, to which Ruth scoffed but offered no further opinion on.

If Stella goes grey early, she knows who to blame for worrying her into it. She found a lone silver hair above her ear a few weeks ago that she rolls between her fingers when she has nothing better to do.

“Oh no, it's okay, you're okay.” She waves the cocoa vaguely. “I'm not here to interrupt if you're working. I just wanted to see you. It's been months! Actually, can I help you with the garden?”

Chise gets that deer-in-headlights look she always does when someone makes her an offer with no strings attached. Ruth, stretched out in the shade under the eaves, slits open an eye and then closes it again.

“And I can take some plants home after?”

Chise relaxes. “Oh, sure. If you're alright with that. Elias?”

“That's fine,” Elias says from the spinach row, flipping his red veil to cover his head. Stella eyes him suspiciously. He waves.

She knows less than nothing about gardening, but Chise instructs her on where to cut and what to inspect for and manages most of the work herself. Silky brings bite-sized sandwiches, and Stella draws Chise into talking about her magic boarding school.

The lessons at the college sound strange, but the classmate drama Stella understands. She agrees and scowls and laughs at the right cues, tamping down the expected twinges of jealousy at the non-Stella people who Chise spends most of her time around now. Chise's learned how to make more friends! That's a *good* thing! Besides, Stella goes through most of her own life with non-Chise friends, too.

It seems like Chise has a pretty large circle of classmates she gets along with, and she has so much to say about them and the professors. Stella has learned some of it from Chise's letters, but, since Chise doesn't write in English as well as she speaks, she keeps her correspondence to the point. Stella prefers to hear it spoken in her voice, anyway.

Eventually, the conversation winds onto other topics, and Stella says, “Chise, have you heard the phrase *sleih beggey* before?”

Chise blinks, and Elias looks up. “Yes,” Chise answers. “Did someone mention it to you?”

Ashen Eyes occasionally calls Chise by it, but Stella doesn't say that. “I found it in a book about fairy tales.”

Chise nods slowly and goes back to examining the flowers. “It used to refer to a neighbor, I think, but I've only heard it to mean people born with a particular trait. A sleih beggey is a human who produces their own magic and who attracts spirits.” She picks a white-brown bug from an aster leaf and sets it in a glass box already containing a dozen others. “I'm one of them.”

“Attracts spirits?” Stella echoes, alarmed.

Chise shrugs, ducking her head.

Elias muses, settling into his instructor voice, “*Attracts* might not be the best word. A sleih beggey draws the *attention* of spirits, and the rest of them naturally follows as a result.”

“So,” says Stella hesitantly – she has any number of things she'd like better than talking to Elias, “less like a magnet, more like a lighthouse?”

Luckily, Chise replies first. “That's a good comparison.”

Elias hums, tipping his head back. “It's still missing some nuance.”

Chise stares at him while Stella looks anywhere but at him, and then Chise leans down to Stella's ear and whispers, “I think he's trying to be nicer. I can... if it's uncomfortable for you, I can ask him to – ?”

“No, it's fine,” Stella murmurs back. (It's not fine.) “He has to start from somewhere.” It was just a *little* bit of attempted murder. They need to move past it at some point.

Elias' shoulders slump faintly, but he doesn't comment on their exchange. He continues, “The sleih beggey are beloved by spirits. Infatuation as well as attention.”

“Oh, well, if it's only good attention....”

...*good* attention didn't cost Chise the color in her arm.

“*Every* spirit?” Stella asks. “Even the ones like Ashen Eyes?”

At the name, Chise makes a face, Ruth grumbles over by the house, and Elias smanages to project annoyance despite having a head both covered by cloth and lacking any facial expression whatsoever. “Even them,” he says.

“Without exception,” adds Ruth, watching Chise rather than Stella. He pushes himself to his feet and pads over, stepping daintily between the crops. “It's probably why I bonded with you

so quickly, Chise. Though I... you *do* look like her."

"I thought it might have been that," says Chise, smiling wanly. She scratches his ears once he moves close enough, and he presses his head against her cheek. Stella hasn't put him in the clear yet either for his role in the sacrifice debacle, but his motive gets him more of a pass than Elias': by saving Chise, he would also have saved his own life.

"Then," says Stella, "what about – ?" She gestures at Elias.

"Elias isn't one of the neighbors," Chise says, but she glances at him for confirmation.

"I'm not," he agrees, "although, come to think of it, I might be close enough to them to share that characteristic."

"Five *million*," Chise murmurs under her breath, whatever that means.

"I haven't regretted it."

Once that moment passes, Stella asks, "They love you just because you exist?"

Chise smiles a bit awkwardly. "It seems that way. I certainly haven't done anything for them yet, most of the time. Or to them."

Wow. "Weird. The neighbors are weird," says Stella, considering her. "But I guess if there was someone out there who *I* had to love for no reason, I wouldn't mind it if it was you."

"Hey, do you love Chise?"

"Dearly," says Ashen Eyes.

Even expecting the answer, Stella doesn't know what to do with it or with how easily they offered it.

They stoop, putting themselves nearly of a level with Stella. "Did you finally ask her about about sleih beggey?"

"I haven't seen her in a while," Stella snaps reflexively. Quietly, though: people don't notice Ashen Eyes, so by proxy they don't notice her as much when she interacts with them, but that effect only covers her so far.

They won't stay for long. They wouldn't have boarded the train with her at all if she didn't notice them at the station and call them over. Too many people for them, and it makes her antsy, also, to have them around crowds for long. She's already caught them glancing one arguing couple's way with just slightly too much intent.

“How has the college treated her?” they ask.

“Collect your own information. I'm not spying for you.”

They snort and straighten up again. “Ah, my every overture rebuffed.”

“You don't act like you love her.”

“And you know much about how a fairy loves, do you?”

“Is it *that* different? I would never hurt Chise the way you did.”

“I see I need to remind you of how you met.”

She frowns. “I didn't do....” Oh. Not to Chise, but to Ethan. “He's my brother, we're going to get into arguments. That's just how it is.” Admittedly, the Christmas one went too far. She doesn't mean to ever yell anything along those lines at him again.

Which puts her a step above Ashen Eyes already. They wouldn't know regret if it cut their head off.

“Is that so?” Their eyes crinkle faintly at the corners. “How long did it take for you to realize he wouldn't return?”

...Half an hour. “*What are you saying*,” she hisses, blanching. With the snow packed thick on the ground, the wind cold enough to bite, Ethan and his intolerance for temperatures below twenty degrees Celsius. She didn't check the yard after the fight. He'd come back inside on his own when he felt like it and no sooner; he told her as much in no uncertain terms. “He would have been fine if you didn't get involved!”

“Oh, I wouldn't claim otherwise.” With faux thoughtfulness as the eyes beneath the hood curve further into crescents, they say, “You might know: I love you as much as I do the littlest mage.”

Foolish and beautiful, they called her once, like a creep. She swallows. “I never asked you to. Actually, if you could *stop* – ”

She stills as their hand finds her cheek. They brush her hair behind her ear with long-nailed fingers dry as old bones and about as warm. “Do you think *I* did?” they say, amused as ever. “Do you think I asked?”

She stares at them. “You....”

“Our words can be used against us in manners that yours can't be used against you. Your kind caught on to that difference *very* quickly. The things I've seen humans do to careless fairies, often with reason but just as frequently *not*.... And yet.” Their hand slips away. “I haven't made it to my age by practicing kindness with every single one of you I've loved.”

When she finds her voice, she manages, “Isn't it just sleih beggey who're that way for you?”

“Well. They are worse for that.” They glance at the doors as the train slows; Stella grabs a support pole for balance. “Is this your stop?”

She flicks her hair back out and shakes her head. “The next one. I'm picking up Ethan from his friend's place.”

“In that case, I will leave you at the next station. You won't object, I hope.”

“No. I... asked you what I wanted to.” Even if she didn't hear an answer she likes.

They laugh. “There's no need to read too much into it.”

They don't treat her much differently than they do adults like Elias, but that comes with the caveat that they consider *everyone* a toddler. Nothing bothers them because they take nothing seriously.

Usually, at least. She thinks that, once or twice, she's witnessed them poised on the knife's edge of actual emotion. Their laughter cut, then – but only their laughter did. They always decided quickly to tip back to the safe side.

She bites her lip. After a moment, she tells them, “That sounds miserable.”

“What does?”

“Not sure,” she says. She indicates the whole of them. “Whatever you have going on.”

“You're always very confident that you won't offend me.”

“I mean, it's true, isn't it?”

They consider her, clearly weighing a response. She probably can annoy them if she goes out of her way to. Throwing salt at them might do it, or a rowan branch wrapped with red thread.

She's strung up talismans of that sort around their flat, disguising them under scrutiny as art projects. Ashen Eyes stole one last month to prove a point (and left a horseshoe in its place with a note to set it over the doorframe to her and Ethan's shared bedroom), but having a fairy repellent shoved under their nose would have to insult them even if it doesn't hurt them.

Before they can reply, she adds, “And I like upsetting you.”

They nearly double over laughing, leaning heavily on their staff as the train rumbles along.

“I don't think people do it enough,” she continues, which only increases the volume of the cackling.

Once they've recovered somewhat, they say, breathless, “Some do try. But it's typically the other way around, yes.”

“Have you thought about making fewer enemies?”

“I *have* been remarkably belligerent lately,” they muse. “It's not an issue. I haven't burned all of my bridges yet.”

“Are you usually *nicer*?” She can't picture it.

...She can sort of picture it if she strains. But they enjoy baiting strong reactions too much for her to fully believe it.

“Usually mages are less interesting.”

That answers that, then. Not less awful, but just less motivated to act on it.

The scenery outside the windows blurs by a little more slowly. Stella leans back on her heels, frowning up at them. “Chise's pretty interesting even when you're not being terrible to her.”

“I can believe that. But I'm not too concerned with being kind towards her.”

“She's never done anything to you! *We've* never done anything to you, either!”

“I am aware,” they say lightly, “though I should remind you that you and your brother gifted me the reason to involve myself last winter, and that the lesson seems to have taken. It's a useful one if you mean to make acquaintances of a mage.”

“There had to have been better ways to get your point across,” she snaps. “If you hadn't started it, we might actually get along right now.”

They chortle. “Perhaps. Your friend might remain in the cage she let the thorned one keep her in, as well. This is a world full of possibility.”

“The – ?” Metaphorical cage, obviously, but a metaphor for what?

“It isn't my story to tell.”

“Stingy,” she mutters as the train shrieks to a stop. She squirrels it away to keep an eye out on her own for and to not ask Chise about. She can't imagine a right way to phrase that question, and she'd have to explain where she heard it from too. “I guess I'll see you around.”

“You will,” they promise with good humor, and leave in a flicker of shadow as soon as the doors open.

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