

The night of the solstice

It was a summer night. Right at the solstice, actually. She didn't know that. She was aware of that fact somewhere in her mind, but that wasn't what she was thinking about. She had gone out and was in the garden. Between the trees and the darkness, everything seemed kinder. Her problems, more distant. Her emotions, more gentle. She could hear the sprinklers behind her and it upset her a little. She hadn't spent enough time in that place to know when it would be the turn of the area she was in, but she didn't want to move either. She was too comfortable and partially, the sound of the water soothed her just as much as it distressed her. Earth at her feet, air stroking her hair, water spraying the plants in the distance. The only thing missing was the fire, which she carried in her chest.

All the stories she had heard came to her mind. The Fae. The fata. Fairies, elves, beings... not humans. More than humans. Inhuman in their behavior, more beautiful and cunning than any person. She had memorized their rules, at least all those she could lay her hands on. She knew to never reveal her name, much less to give it away. She had learned to surround herself with salt and to carry quartz with her, not for protection but to see them better. To teach herself. In fact, she wanted to meet them. She knew in her heart that if one of these beings found her, she would beg to be taken and not the other way round. She didn't care about the consequences, she just... wanted it. She wanted it. She longed for it and would have given herself over full of joy and emotion at the first heartbeat.

She was fed up with human emotions. She understood them. She understood why she felt them. She knew they helped her learn and improve, to value each of the steps she had taken. And yet, they weighted on her. She knew the future would be better, but the stone she still felt in her throat sometimes made her yearn for something different. Something that would help her feel better. Something that would make her immerse herself in something new, give her mind and heart to a new adventure, one so foreign to her that every step she took would feel like the first. Something wild, primeval, different. Strange. Unique. She loved it so much and yet she would not have known how to define it if she had been asked. The words would have escaped her tongue, leaving in her mind only the strange mixture of sensations and longing that seized her whole being. How to explain it? How to even beg for it, and to whom? There was doubt in her mind, of course. Reality and fantasy intermingled in an eternal dance, so close together that she was not sure which part was whose. It was, inevitably, inherent in the first night of summer.

Her prayers, whether she wanted them or not to be that, were answered. The darkness, aided by the night, transported her pleas and a small attentive being put their ear to the ground to give them the attention they needed. They closed their eyes in the moonlight, inclining their head to the wind so that it could tell them all the secrets and pains of the little reckless human. It wasn't as if they were older. One hundred years in their kingdom were nothing, but of course they were more than the twenty years of that poor misguided almond. They smiled,

tempting the world with their gesture and decided at that very moment to go out that night and play.

It was their first Saint John. The fireworks took them by surprise. The bomb of light and color exploded as they crossed the passage and the noise, the explosion, made every hair on their body stand up. They landed on the other side, all four limbs brushing the earth just removed by the sprinklers, their body crouched waiting for an attack that never came. The bombs continued, of course. Humans poured out all their feelings, dreams and emotions, painting the sky with lights as toxic as their own thoughts. It was beautiful, however, and they were able to appreciate its strange beauty. They saw the colors and shapes, smelled the horrible traces it left, and still understood it. At least, they thought they did. They thought themselves invincible, wrapped in the certainty of their difference. They were not human; they were terribly and vainly aware of it. They adored their being and loved every inch of it. Everything that was not themselves was, in some way, below.

They saw her later. She was lying on the grass. She had overcome her fear of sprinklers and although she had gotten a little wet on the way, she had been there for a while and the worst of her miscalculation had already dried up. From where she was, she couldn't see them. They stood up a little, trying to find out if she was asleep. She wasn't, but she didn't seem to have any intention of clearing it up. Her eyes were closed, a bellicose smile was dancing silently on her lips. The all-powerful young being felt challenged.

They did not approach, of course. It was the wind under their command that brushed against her first. It stirred her hair, played with her clothes and shouted in a low voice in her ears. All they got in response was a lazy grunt. Perplexed, a little offended, they saw the woman curl up even more in the grass, as if refusing to see them. In reality, she was refusing to see the world. As far as she was concerned, they were late. It was twelve o'clock and there was nothing there, so it was time to say goodbye to the world. At least for a while. It was a lot to take and she had a limit. The embrace of the grass and the darkness behind her always friendly eyelids were much kinder. The breeze bothered her, but not enough to make her get up.

The nose, however, was far more persuasive.

She jumped up on the spot, shouting and breaking the silence of the beautiful night. She bumped into a tree on her back and decided that its bark was stable and durable enough to anchor her to that world a little longer. And, if not her entirety, at least her sanity. Just a little. Just enough.

Now huddled against the tree and, even so, looking at them face to face, the being knew at once that she would never let them know that she had been frightened. They were accustomed to reactions of their companions in tenths of a second; one hundred emotions expressed in the course of a sigh, expressed in front of him on a long fan that he could read as easily as if it were the lyrics of a lullaby. Her leap of surprise, on the other hand, was... clumsy. It had lasted too long, although they assumed that for her it had been no more than the blink of an eye. They had never seen an emotion last so long, take so long, cause a movement? They had done well to get closer. The stories and guesses of the more experienced did not give a

single micron of the information they were finding out. What a curious creature. Suddenly, they felt a fire in their chest, and as they looked forward, they saw the tiny flame in hers.

-This was what you wanted. -Why not anymore?

Fear glowed in the eyes of the prey for just a moment, before it was completely drowned in pride. They looked at the strange creature in front of them. They were alike. Four limbs, two orbs to see and a mouth to kiss. And yet they were completely different. The more she looked at them, the more her heart calmed down, substituting panic for curiosity. Their hair, though the same as hers, refused to obey the laws of gravity completely. Instead, it floated quietly behind its owner. A position no doubt far more noble than being crushed against the wood. And there was more to it. Their teeth, just a crumb sharper than they should be. Their eyes, completely opaque and devoid of any emotion she knew how to interpret. Their posture, one leg stretched out in the grass and the other kneeling. Even so, they straightened up to look at her, and although their faces were at the same height, she knew that they were much taller. Everything about this creature screamed danger... and attraction. She felt how her body wanted to move away from the tree at all costs. Whether to escape or to crash into it, she didn't know. Before she could avoid it, her tongue took over her lips and, with the moon as her witness, she found herself answering him with imprudence:

-Who tells you that I don't want it anymore? Does a little fear scare you?

She knew they could smell her emotions. Her face and body were more to them than an open book: they were a constant scream, desperate to be heard. There was no point in hiding them. Nor had she ever felt ashamed of them, so she didn't now. They were hers and she protected them when they needed it, but she would also show them off at any time. From the smallest and most cuddly to the ones that filled her with longing or anger. Fear was no exception. Had she made a mistake? No. Every emotion was sincere and had its place. There was fear because there should be. Because a higher head, eyes too deep and a strange and too comfortable posture could mean the greatest change in her life; the end of it. At that moment, she was at their mercy. It had been so from the moment when the being had set his eyes on her and, instead of fighting it, she accepted it with all the ferocity of which her little body was capable.

The being tilted their head once more, confused. This was not like anything they had imagined, she was not like anything they had imagined. She was small, imperfect, one might even say vulgar. Her hair didn't shine, her eyes were small and, in general, she was badly made. And yet...

Their eyes fell once more to the flame she carried on her chest. It was tiny, it didn't fit anymore, but it burned as brightly as their own. Ah, curiosity was an interesting thing. Like gunpowder, the slightest touch could make it explode in all directions, in a very unpredictable way. They found themselves smelling it again and, amused, brushed their fangs against the bristly hairs on her skin.

-You want to leave. But you also want to come back.- they said, reading her.

She just nodded. What else could she say? A current of air suddenly enveloped them both, making her shudder. It was cold. The morning had come and was devouring them. The clock was ticking, for the sun was just around the corner.

The being meditated long and hard, three whole seconds. They raised a finger in the air, right in front of her pupils.

-One year. One year away... in exchange for your name.

It seemed like a fair deal to them. A great deal, really. Their kind didn't normally bargain. They took what they wanted with deception and lies, reveling in the confusion they caused. However, this was their first exchange. They did not want to alter what was in front of them, they just wanted to study it. To understand it. Her name would open the door to all the answers. Once they understood, they knew that no human could escape their smile. Not confused, or scared. Not the iron bearers or the lively children who ran through the meadows and into the sacred circles without any understanding of where they were.

They smiled with all the kindness they could muster. It was a lot. They held out their hand and their orbs glowed as they saw her flame flicker, before burning even more brightly. A blink later, she was in his arms.

-Tell me then, little untamed flame, what is your name?

She smiled and, from the little haven of strangeness and peace that seemed to her bosom, answered:

-You may call me Alondra.

Anger came and went, replaced by a laugh that was at once like fresh may water, the sparks jumping in a forge, and the safe, light steps of an experienced ballerina.

-We will see about that.

When the dawn came to look for them, she found that they had left a long time ago. She was a few hours late, and a whole year early.

