

Autumn Leaves

Autumn walked out her back door to the trees behind her house. She was tired of work. Tired of life. Walking through the woods was a much-needed distraction. At this point, the woods had become a second home for her. Autumn knew them like the back of her hand.

She stopped at her favorite log and sat down, closing her eyes. The cool fall breeze blew gently across her face, tugging strands of her auburn locks with it. The birds chirped happily above her. To Autumn's left, the stream could be heard bubbling and running over rocks. Her heartbeat and anxious thoughts slowed, coming to rest in the forest. She opened her eyes and stared off into the trees. Her shy smile greeted the reds and oranges of the leaves that waved back at her filled with sunshine.

Her eyes caught on something farther out in the woods. There was a pair of trees surrounded by tiny white flowers she hadn't ever seen before. The two trees bent towards each other before entwining and making an arch of sorts. That was odd. Autumn had explored acres of this forest multiple times and hadn't noticed that before. Curiosity tugged at her sleeve, begging her to follow.

She shrugged. Why not? As she approached, the arch of trees seemed to grow. It was much larger than it had first appeared. The trees conjoined several feet above her head, giving her a large space to walk through. Autumn reached out her hand to place it on the rough bark and stepped through the arch. Nothing happened and she wryly shook her head at herself. She didn't know why she had hoped for anything more. Fantasies like that were for children. Magical lands weren't real. No one could escape the prisons of their lives despite how much they wished otherwise.

Autumn let out a little laugh and turned, ready to head back home. She crossed through the arch once again and walked back on the path only she could see. She happened to glance down at her right hand and saw that the ring she usually wore was gone. A pang of sorrow stabbed through her. That was her mother's ring. She had given it to Autumn before she died. It was Autumn's most prized

possession. She looked around. How would she ever find it out here? Maybe it came off when she ran her hand across the bark of the arched trees.

Autumn turned and headed slowly back to the arch, scanning the ground for any sign of her mother's ring. Every little flash of yellow leaves caught her eye and by the time she made it back to the pair of trees, she had nearly given up all hope. And then she saw the shine of gold in the sunlight directly below the arch. Autumn released a heavy sigh of relief. Keeping her eyes on the ring to make sure she didn't lose it again, she hurried forward. As she crouched and picked up the ring, she lost her balance. Autumn fell forward and planted her hands in soft grass.

Grass?

The forest floor was all covered in leaves. She slid the ring onto her finger and looked up. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She was still in a forest. Just not *her* forest. The autumn leaves had disappeared and green life flourished over everything. This forest felt older. So much older. There was something magical about it. The air felt so alive. Everything did. Autumn felt more awake than she had in years. She slid her mother's ring onto her finger and stood slowly.

Autumn glanced back through the arch and saw the forest she knew. She could go back. But what was there for her? Work? She smirked. Not a chance. There wasn't even anyone for her to go back to. And whatever this was- whatever this place was- it was calling to her. Even if it was a dream, she could still enjoy it while it lasted.

Autumn decided to take the time to study this new world. The trees rose high above her head, the green leaves thick, only allowing a few shafts of sunlight to trickle down. She stood in soft grass dotted with the little white flowers she had seen outside the arch. The breeze was warm and soothing. The wind almost carried music along with it. A branch not that far off snapped and Autumn's adrenaline spiked. There was something close by. She refused to run though. She didn't want to flee like a coward.

Autumn stood there, waiting for whatever it was to approach. She jumped as another branch snapped. She stared wide eyed as something moved nearby. It was large. Her imagination ran rampant with ideas about what it could be. And then it entered her line of vision. A huge white stag with huge antlers. It was the most beautiful thing Autumn had ever seen. It just watched her with dark green eyes. It pawed the ground with its hoof and tossed its head. It turned around and looked back at her.

“What are you doing?” she whispered quietly.

It took another step into the trees and looked back at her once again.

“Do you want me to follow you?”

The stag tossed its head again so Autumn followed. It led her through the trees, twisting a route deeper and deeper into the forest. Her fear drained from her body and she let a smile spread across her face as blue butterflies flitted their way in front of her. She followed the stag to a line of trees that curved inward towards each other. They made a giant hall. The trunks were the pillars and the branches and leaves were the roof. Autumn started as she realized people were standing in the hall. Beautiful men and women who weren't quite human. They were watching her curiously. The stag walked forward, so she followed.

Autumn couldn't help but stare wide eyed at the people she passed. Their faces were kind but stern. Their ears were pointed and their bodies were lithe and graceful. At the end of the hall was a throne made of trees woven together. On that throne was a beautiful woman. Her long silver hair flowed over her pale skin and green dress. As she approached, Autumn knew she was ancient. There was no sign of age on her face, but her eyes shone with wisdom that could only come from decades and decades of life. Autumn also knew she was powerful. She radiated with it. And the crown made of gold leaves only solidified that idea in her mind.

The woman spoke. “Welcome. What is your name?”

Autumn did her best to stand tall before this queen of another world. "My name is Autumn, Your Highness."

Her laugh sounded like the chiming of silver bells. "There is no need for titles here. You may call me Asterin. Where do you come from, Autumn? Certainly not this world. The air around you pulses with energy of other realms."

"No, Milady," Her eyes twinkled at that. "I somehow came through a portal. I think. I'm not really sure what happened."

"Well you are welcome, daughter of another world."

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So Autumn stayed. For many years she lived with the beings in the other world. One day, Asterin called Autumn to the throne room.

"Autumn, I called you here to ask you something. Would you be willing to join my court?"

Autumn blinked in shock. "Of course! I would be honored."

"The honor is mine. You will be the first other worlder in my court."

Autumn beamed at her. Asterin took a gold band that matched her crown and approached me. Autumn knelt. "You have been a joy to know, Autumn. Will you serve this court until your ending days?"

"I will." She extended her arm and the queen slid the band to her bicep. Bright light flared. When she looked down, Autumn saw that the gold band complete with delicate leaves was fused with her arm. Skin and metal met, completely smooth. She stared in wide-eyed awe.

Asterin helped her stand. "Welcome to my court, daughter of another world." Tears shone in Autumn's eyes as she embraced the queen who had become like a mother to her.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you so much."

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I sat back and smiled at my computer. I had finally finished my story. I stared out the window, watching as the cars passed by. This world was pale compared to that other one. I wished I could be in that story. I looked back at my computer, unsure of where to go next. Then I rolled up my sleeve and stared at the gold band fused with skin.

I smiled.

Would anyone believe?