

## The Little Star and The King

"Astrid, do not stray too far." Her father's voice was quiet, but never soft. Always firm; the voice of command, of order. But little Astrid did not know of the strife her father had been raised in. She did not know of the dangers and horrors of war. Little Astrid was only a few years old, five to be exact. She could not do much besides chase after the little faeries in the woods. The ones her papa would tell her never to speak her name to. But still, they were so small. So pretty. How could she not follow?

And off she went, running as fast as her little feet could take her. Three little balls of gleaming light, dazzling her as they flickered through the forest trees. She knew the path back home, knew to follow the egg shaped leaves which hung low beneath the branches. She hadn't spared a second thought as to where they were taking her. It only took a brief moment for her to feel the air rush against her skin. Her vision blurred. The rush, the sensation. A brief spark of fear. She was falling.

But then she wasn't. Something warm and soft caught her. It almost felt like a hug.

"Well we ought to be careful now." said a voice, low and deep, much deeper than her father's. "Wouldn't want to scrape a knee, don't we?"

Little Astrid felt her body lift up in the air before feeling firm, warm arms around her legs. Hoisting her up, she could see a dark green, velvet like cloak. Beyond the thick hood laid a short, scruffy brown beard with somewhat messy brown hair. He took a quick look around, his eyes narrowing to a frown for a short second.

"And you, you lot know better than to trick a princess. She's too small. A fall from this height will hurt her."

With kind eyes, the stranger looked at her. He looked like a soft older man, not elderly, but not young either. He put little Astrid down on her feet before crouching to meet her eyes. "The fey are a bunch of tricksters. They didn't mean any harm, they just wanted to have some fun." he explained. There was a gentleness in his voice, something very trustworthy and warm.

It made her voice go soft for a bit. "Thank you for helping..."

"Oh no need to thank me princess."

"I'm not a princess." Astrid giggled, putting up her little hands to cover her mouth.

"Oh I know a princess when I see one!"

Little Astrid giggled again, smiling into her palm. One of the little faeries fluttered by, swirling around them twice before flying off. A peculiar shaped weed sticking out of the stranger's coat pocket caught Astrid's eye. Her papa told her about this, a common weed that's very prickly. Bad to eat too, her papa would never use them to make his medicine.

"Why the prickly ones? They're bad for you."

"What? Really?? I thought these would make nice healing salves."

"No you want, you want the ones that look like flowers. They have five petals and they're white and they're soft and they're long."

Astrid stretched out five fingers as she explained. The stranger simply smiled and nodded along. When she finished, he lifted his hand and gently patted her head. "You're very smart for your age." his voice, there was something familiar about it. Something deeper. "Your parents have raised you well Astraea, I'm very grateful for them."

"How'd you know my name?" she squinted, raising both her little hands to touch the stranger's. It was big and rough, it reminded her of her father.

"Well..."

Before the stranger could finish, there came a noise, a small snap of a branch. Little Astrid turned around sharply, finding the familiar cloak of her father peaking into view.

"Astrid, who are you talking to?"

"Oh um..." and as she turned to face the kind stranger, he was nowhere to be found. With no reason or warning, he was gone. Little Astrid hardly felt his touch or warmth leave her, she hadn't noticed at all. It was as if he disappeared into thin air. "There was a man, but...he's gone now?"

Her father quickly scooped her into his arms, throwing his furs protectively over her.

"Come now Astrid. The forest is dangerous at night."

Her father placed a hand over her head before turning to walk away. Little Astrid moved up a bit to peak behind his shoulders. There she found hidden in the trees, the gentle stranger, his image lit by the light emitted by the faeries. He waved goodbye to her with his big, heavy hand, a smile hidden under his hood.

Astrid returned the wave and watched as he disappeared further into the forest.