

*Excerpt from Autumn's Daughter, by M. Walshe. All rights reserved.*

The seasons changed. The moment we stepped onto the path, the summery warmth of the glade gave way to a chill wind that rustled eerily through the dying leaves. I shivered and paused. Closing my eyes, I listened with my body to a deep vibration that surrounded me. My toes ached to slip out of my shoes and let the sensation run wild through me.

“Uh, Niamh?” Lance sounded nervous. “Maybe we should keep moving. It’s creepy out here.”

I opened my eyes and looked around. From the glade to the forest, the sun had dipped from mid-day to late afternoon. Deep shadows covered the mulch, hiding a thousand tiny creatures that chirped and rustled and purred as they went about their lives. This part of the forest was rippling with life in a way the glade had not been. It felt old and powerful. The trees were thick and gnarled, knotted with nests of insects, birds, and rodents. I don’t know how I knew, but I could tell what lived in each ancient hollow.

“Creepy?” I breathed in disbelief. “This forest is...alive.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?” he asked. “It’s making my skin crawl. Let’s go, okay?”

“You should listen to your young man if you insist on following this course of action.”

I jumped. Robin had appeared beside us without a sound. Connected as I felt to everything around me, his unexpected presence felt empty and...terrifying. Robin saw my reaction and nodded grimly.

“This part of the forest is controlled by your...extended family, shall we say? You are safe here from wild things, but do not be lulled into complacency. The dangerous things will have no trouble hiding from your senses.”

“I don’t remember inviting you along,” I said crossly. “If you’re not going to help, then go away.”

“To borrow your eloquent speech: make me.” Robin smiled grimly. “It’s more than my life is worth to leave you alone to die.”

“So you’ve decided to help us after all?” I asked.

“It would be useful to have a guide here, Niamh,” Lance pointed out.

A flock of baseball-sized brown birds erupted from a copse of trees in front of us, fleeing from an enormous bird of prey circling overhead. Wings burst out of my back and I was windborne, heart pounding. Treetops fell away behind me as I fled. No. A flock of birds raced away from me in terror. I

opened my beak to shriek in...fear? Triumph.

A hand on my human shoulder dragged me back to earth and I stumbled. Lance grabbed my arm to steady me and I leaned on him long enough to reorient myself. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe we could use a guide.”

“Fine,” Robin said, relief plain in his voice. “May I suggest that the most helpful thing I can do is to teach you a bit of control over your power before we attempt to mount a rescue against experienced guards?”

He gestured back to the glade. “I can protect you in the glade while you learn. It is a place of power for me.”

Reluctantly, I nodded. I didn’t trust him, not for a second, but the longer I stayed in the forest, the more intensely my senses were assaulted. What had begun as an exhilarating sense of invincibility was quickly turning into a panic attack. I had never before understood the way fear of death drives the world. Every bug, every rodent, every bird, even the trees went about every chore of their lives with one thought: don’t die. If you had a chorus of ten thousand whispering “Don’t die, don’t die, don’t die...” directly into your nervous system, you wouldn’t want to hang around either.

As we turned back to the glade, energy crackled in the air around us. The stink of ozone invaded my nose. Overhead, thunderheads blacker and denser than any I’d ever seen rushed in at the speed of, well, lightning.

“Foul wind,” Robin hissed. “I should have known.”

I couldn’t tell if “foul wind” was an observation or a curse.

“What’s going on?” I asked. The chorus of the forest surviving was rising, striking my nerves with more intensity with each boom of thunder that rolled over us. I wanted to retch.

“Quick,” Lance shouted over the noisy winds. “Back to the glade!”

Robin took us both by an arm and begun to propel us in the other direction. “Not there!” he hollered. “It’s not safe anymore. Run as fast as you can, but do not leave the path! Go!”

He pushed us forward and turned to face the storm. I felt a presence form in the forest. Without turning to look, I knew with every molecule in my body that the new arrival was bad news. Not evil, exactly, but mean and enormous. And hungry.

“We can’t abandon him!” I called to Lance. “We have to help!”

Lance grimaced and glanced behind us. All of the blood drained from his face. “Maybe we should keep running like he told us to.”

I turned to see what I could already feel. The sight did nothing to reassure me.

At the boundary of the glade that only moments ago had seemed like safety itself stood a six-armed monster made of what looked like tightly packed clouds swirling beneath a thin skin of polished hematite. Purple electricity arced up and down all six of its arms, charging the enormous lightning bolts held in its fists. Robin stood in front of it, arms raised. His fingertips reached only as high as the monster I henceforth dub Mr. T. Cloud’s bulbous kneecaps.

As I hesitated between fleeing and joining the fight, Mr. T. Cloud cast its bolts directly at Robin. I shrieked, but when the blinding light settled, I saw that the lightning had not been meant to injure Robin. Instead, a deadly tent of living energy pinned Robin where he stood. As if Robin meant nothing, the cloud giant stepped over the crackling cage and centered its flickering cobalt eyes on me.

“Aww, crap,” I muttered.

Lance saw it too. “Run, Niamh!” he screamed.

But I didn’t. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins. I could feel every life in the forest fighting for survival and I couldn’t just walk away. Without stopping to think how stupid or hopeless my actions might be, I dashed off the path to circle around behind the lumbering monster.

It’s a universally-acknowledged truth that the speed and maneuverability of a monster decreases in direct proportion to its size. Instinct told me to keep moving around the beast. Terror and a drive to survive pulled that tingling silver feeling to the surface as I ran. I stumbled and gasped. Never before had I felt so clearly what my power was. Here, it was nothing so mushy as a vague light that responded to my emotions. The light did not blind me, but resolved into a clear, delicate web of spidery strands ran out from me, draping and piercing everything in the world.

When I say everything, I mean everything. Infinitesimally thin strands wove me into the molecular structure of even the air itself. I realized then that I could manipulate the strings, bring things together or pull them apart with a thought.

I didn’t have time to think about how scary I might have the power to be because Mr. T. Cloud turned to lumber after me, ignoring Lance. I dashed back and forth behind it, running in and out of its legs as I considered the strands that tied me to even this paranormal enemy. They looked fragile and

easy to snap, the exact opposite of the garden hose strand that bound me to Lance.

I didn't think I could use those connections to defeat the monster. They looked like they would break uselessly if I put any pressure on them at all. In fact, none of the tiny strands reaching out from me looked strong enough to do anything to this titan. What good is power if you don't know how to wield it?

Mr. T. Cloud took a swipe at me with one of its cow-sized paws as I dashed around its right side. I ducked, but the hair at the back of my neck crackled with electricity. No doubt my hair was floating straight out from my head.

"Niamh!" I heard Lance scream. He sounded terrified and I realized that the monster was between us. I doubled back to run toward him, almost running smack into a bolt of lightning as I turned.

"I'm okay!" I called. I didn't add "Just barely."

"What do you think you're doing? You'll get yourself killed!" he shouted back.

I didn't answer. Changing the angle of my view to run toward Lance had revealed what might be the monster's weakness. From the midnight clouds above, I could see sturdy strands of silver light feeding energy into the monster. They went taut and slack like the strings of a marionette.

I couldn't touch them. Unlike the rest of the silver web overlaying the forest, they did not connect to me in any way. I couldn't pull on them, but as I ran, whipping my neck around to track both the monster and Lance, I wondered just how sturdy those strands were. Mine might be thinner, but if they held...

I couldn't concentrate enough to manipulate the silver threads while I was running, so I ran to stand between Robin and Mr. T. Cloud. Lance had decided that the best way to help was by distracting the giant and was busy running and ducking and tossing stones and seeds and brush at it. His efforts were clearly no more than a minor annoyance, but they did seem to be confusing the monster's focus.

I reached up for the clouds as I had seen Robin do, trying for a strand that ran between myself and an old oak. I knew, who knows how, that the tiny filament was tough and resilient. Focusing all my efforts on my hands, I willed that single strand to wrap around a strand connecting the monster's head to the storm clouds above. With my other hand I reached to catch the strand as it looped, pulling tight as I could. With the snick of wire cutters clipping through metal, my strand sheared through the Mr. T. Cloud's celestial umbilical. Angry thunder shook the woods and lightning flashed around us, but the light

died out of the monster's eyes and its head flopped over and tumbled to the ground.

Lance's mom keeps chickens. She slaughters them herself when they stop producing eggs. I have a gruesome memory of offering to help her when I was younger. I think she was trying to teach me a bit of science by letting the chicken's body get up to run around after she chopped its head off. I still occasionally have nightmares about the fowl corpse chasing me around the O'Ryan's woodshed.

Mr. T. Cloud was pretty much a chicken.

Without a head, its lumbering gait became less directed, but the six arms still flailed angrily, throwing lightning bolts in every direction. I would have been hit by one if Lance hadn't anticipated it and barreled into me like a linebacker. We went flying off to the side of Robin's cage. Six inches off and Lance would have plowed us straight into the field of crackling electricity.

"Niamh, can you do that with the filaments of this trap?" Robin asked.

I looked up from under Lance, dazed. I couldn't quite tell if there was one strand or three, but they didn't look as thick as the one I had already cut. "I think so."

"Try, please."

Lance pushed himself off from me, looking between Robin and me as I reached my hand out to the sky.

"Did I give her brain damage?" he asked, not seeing what I could. "What is she doing?"

Robin motioned for silence. "Let her concentrate," he whispered.

It was more difficult to cut those strands. They just wouldn't stay still. I squinted to bring them into better focus. The blind cloud monster was crashing away from us at the moment, but I could see the strand I had snapped reaching about for the severed end. We didn't have much time before the even angrier Mr. T. Cloud could see again.

"I don't mean to rush you," Robin hissed, "but we are running out of time."

On the fourth try, I managed to loop my sturdy line around those keeping Robin's cage in place. I quickly jerked it tight, cutting through the threads like butter. Robin's cage disintegrated in a shower of sparks that stung and burned everywhere they landed. Bits of our clothing smoked. Robin crawled over to us and put a hand on each of us. The last thing I saw before I blacked out was a net of silver threads whipping out from Robin to surround us in light.