

They sat on the grass at twilight, the surroundings were quiet and yet the air felt alive with an unexplainable energy. As if something quite extraordinary was coming. The energy flowed through the ground, into the plants and the sleeping animals. There was no place for words or any human interaction. This was the way the world was meant to be, pure and free. At least that was what Mairead thought, as usual, James tended to disagree.

“Why do you insist on sitting here every night?”

With a long-suffering sigh of a person who had been asked the same question multiple times, Mairead replied, “You would think that, with me being a Princess and all, I would not be subjected to your inane questioning every night.”

“As your guard, I have a duty to protect you and if I must sit out here every night watching these blasted stars, I deserve an explanation”. James’ reply was put forth in an exasperated tone that also suggested this conversation had been held many times before.

“As my guard?”, Mairead questioned with an elegant eyebrow raise, “Do you really want the answer I would give to my guard or would you prefer the one I would give to a friend?”

James was taken aback; this was more open than Mairead had ever been regarding their nightly excursions. She was happy to speak of many things with him, close friends that they were, but this had always been a subject that she was extremely tight-lipped about. He knew that his next words had to be chosen carefully or she would close off and he would probably never be able to ask her again.

“As your friend”, he said slowly, “I would like to know as your friend, what is it about this particular time and place that makes you so happy.”

Mairead smiled gently as if this was the answer she had been waiting for. James returned the smile cautiously, feeling like he had passed some sort of unspoken test. Mairead opened her mouth to speak but closed it abruptly. She seemed unsure of herself, inwardly debating whether or not to actually reveal her thoughts. After knowing her for so many years, James could see the wheels in her head turning and knew that her moment of openness was slowly fading. Deciding to ease the tension, he offered up his own thoughts.

“You know that I don’t like it here”, Mairead turned her head towards him, surprised he was filling the silence, “but it’s not for the reasons you think.”

“And what is it that I am thinking?”

“That, as a guard and your friend, I dislike you being out at night. That I dislike being in an area so exposed and dark; that I am simply tired and wish to go to bed but there is far more to me than that.” James said all of this in an even tone, calm and collected, but if you listened carefully as Mairead did, then you could hear the slight tremble of his voice. The deeply rooted nervousness bubbling beneath the surface. When he spoke again however, it seemed as if he had gained some confidence.

“I dislike the stars”, he said simply, “I dislike the quiet purity and peacefulness they cast over the night. The way they seem impossibly far away and yet oppressively close at the same time. They are light, they are innocent and I feel unworthy. They are seen by people in far off places, kingdoms and more. Places I can never dream of travelling to. To me, they represent my irrelevance. I am but one person, of relatively low standing, existing amongst an infinite vast sky of possibility and adventure that I can never truly experience. I can only sit in this meadow with you and contemplate what my purpose is and to be truly honest, sometimes I wish my purpose was more than just being your guard. Sometimes, I wish I did not exist at all.”

He closed his eyes, tilted his head back and let out a breath. He appeared lighter and more burdened at the same time. As if revealing his secrets had been cathartic but now, with them out in the open, he was vulnerable.

Mairead was quiet. The energy in the air was thrumming louder now, as if it were music. The melody twisted and turned, trying to find an ending. She took a breath and closed her eyes, mimicking James’ actions. He had told her his reasoning, now it was her turn.

“We see the same stars”, James started as if he had forgotten she was there. She noticed and smiled hesitantly before continuing, “They all look down on us equally, a light shining on you regardless of who you are or where you find yourself. There will always be light, even in our darkest moments, there is always light. I look up at the stars and I imagine that there are others in far off lands doing the same. Maybe they sit quietly, maybe they sing or perhaps they speak of their troubles and their hopes. After all, something so pure and light must bring comfort. I know I feel it. I feel as if someone is watching over me from above, a guardian. A presence of hope and purity, unaffected by the messiness of human lives. I can speak of my worries with no fear of the judgement or prejudice found within people. I do not expect to receive an answer, I doubt I would believe it if I did. I do not need to see or hear to believe that my guardian exists. I do not need to have all my problems fixed nor all my wishes granted. I just need to come here every night and think on my problems, fears and hopes in silence. Sometimes, I find a solution I had never considered, sometimes I find nothing at all but I do not grow angry. For I know that tomorrow, I will come here again and the stars will still be here. I will think on my troubles once more and perhaps find an answer then. No matter what happens in my life, where I am, who I am with, who I become, the stars and my guardians remain. They are infinite and extraordinary. They inspire me to become better, to help others find the serenity I have found or to ease their troubles and foster their hopes the way that mine have been. I do not need to travel, to see the stars from different places in order to feel worthy. I will not be worthy anywhere. How could I be? How can I compete with such pureness and light? All I can do is compete with my past self, to be better than I once was. We see the same stars James and they see us all too. No one person more than another, we are all under their light.”

Mairead opened her eyes and was surprised to see a tear running down James’ cheek. His eyes remained closed but his head was now bowed slightly. She felt a cool breeze on her face and was suddenly aware that she too had been crying

slightly. She wasn't particularly surprised. This was her most personal secret, one she had kept from James ever since they first began sitting out here all those years ago. Despite knowing each other since birth, their conversations had always been limited to trivial matters, nothing like this. With their individual confessions, they had clearly moved passed this stage in their friendship.

A small wave of each of her hands caused two handkerchiefs to appear from nowhere. One was passed to James and she kept the other. Feeling the gift being pressed into his hand, James sat up and wiped his face before examining the white cloth.

"Your conjurations are growing stronger", he muttered, "If I didn't know better, I would never have guessed."

The deeper meaning behind his last statement was not lost between the two of them as they turned to each other.

"We see the same stars" whispered James.

"And they see us" Mairead replied with a watery smile.

They grasped each other's hand in comfort and turned back to the sky.

"I feel as if you are a completely different person to me now, Mairead"

"Likewise, James."

She sighed once more and moved to stand. However, James was quicker and pulled her up by their connected hands which they then let go. There was a moment of silence and they faced each other, as if they were only now seeing the other clearly. Mairead stepped back and held out her hand, similar to a gesture of greeting, James smiled as he took her smaller hand in his.

"Hello, my name is Mairead and I see the same stars you do. Will you be my friend?"

James' smile grew as he replied, "Pleasure to meet you Mairead, my name is James. I too see the same stars and look forward to seeing them with you from now on, as friends."

The music in the air rose in pitch and energy, before finally finding the ending it had been looking for. Hands were let go and the two new friends made their way towards home.

"We have been out for longer than usual", James noted with some trepidation.

"You have no need to worry James" Mairead reassured him, "I'll just say that I wanted to stay for longer tonight."

"You don't think they'll mind?", he said, referring to the guards who manned the gates that they were now approaching.

"I'm the Princess of this Kingdom, they better not mind."

She spoke with such an indignant tone, one he rarely heard from her when referring to her status, that he found it hard to keep a straight face. His resolve broke when he

saw that she was also trying not to laugh. Their laughter carried them to the castle and resulted in many strange looks from the guards but they were unconcerned. Tonight had been something so wonderful that no amount of disapproving looks could dampen their spirits. As they both lay in their quarters that night, they saw the stars as they closed their eyes. Unknowingly, they both wished for the same thing before sleep claimed them.

“Keep him safe.”

“Keep her safe.”