

Leaf

“One leaf, two leafs, three leafs... five leafs! Weeeehehe!”

Out in a great forest somewhere, a little girl by the name of Maria was playing amongst the golden trees of autumn. Her mother kept a close eye on her as she folded away the picnic blankets and placed the lids onto jam jars.

“Maria, don't go wondering just on your ownsome,” she called after her little one, who was then climbing onto the trunk of a fallen tree. “There's all kinds of things out there in the woods, and not many of them are friendly!”

“I'll be fine, Mama!” Maria said proudly, and waved a stick with a maple leaf tied onto the end of it. “As long as I have my magic wand, I'm afraid of nothing!” The child balanced on tiptoes and twirled once before jumping off the log. Her mother sighed, and put away the last of the picnic remnants.

“It's almost time to go home. Mama is going to read her book now, so keep close to the picnic area, okay?” Maria nodded once as her mother gave her a pat on the head. “Good, good. Now... where did I put that novel?”

The girl watched her mother walk up to the parked car and open the back door. She patted around inside until she found what she was looking for, then sat at the picnic table and began to read.

Maria had quickly lost interest in what her mother was doing, and walked towards the big log again, when she heard a soft sound coming from just behind her. She jumped, startled, and whirled around. There was nothing there, and the rustling of leaves that followed confirmed that it was only the cheeky wind swaying the trees' branches.

Maria pointed towards the trees, and proclaimed: “Oh, wind! Oh, silly wind! I, Maria, the autumn fairy, will find where you hid in the branches!” She giggled and ran into the wood, leaving her mother behind to concentrate.

After hopping over small rocks, jumping over fallen trees and running after the sound of the wind, Maria was huffed and puffed. She sat down on a large, mossy stone and looked around her as colours of red, gold and brown fluttered to the ground like tired butterflies. Maria tried to catch one of the colours, but, as she grasped it, the leaf crumpled in her hands. “Oh! I'm sorry... I didn't mean to hurt you, Mr. Leaf.” She placed it on the ground in front of her.

A little later, she shivered, and saw the light around her was fading from yellow, to orange, to red. “Mummy said not to go away from the picnic table... but the wind was so naughty! Tricking me into thinking the trees were dancing! But...” Only then, she realised. “I can't see Mama and the picnic table anymore -”

Tears began to well up in her eyes, but she stood up defiantly and wiped them away. “No! Maria, the autumn fairy, is not afraid! She is not lost! I have my wand to guide me back to Mama!” She



waved the stick, but alas, no sparkles or flames came forth. “Oh, no... my wand is broked.” The tears began to rise again.

The soft sound distracted her.

“Not now, Mr. Wind!... My wand is broked, and my Mama is gone!” She sobbed a little. “No more silliness!”

The soft noise came again, a little louder, a little louder each time, and Maria felt less sorry for herself and more annoyed as it persisted. “I said, Mr. Wind! I'm not in the mooood!” She turned again, towards the sound, and pointed her wand.

“....Oh!”

She stood still. There, before her, was a thin, lanky, black creature, so tall she had to crane her neck upwards.

It jittered its maw and clattered its bony joints, staring into Maria with great, pale eyes. It was moving very slowly towards her, the soft sound coming from its tiny feet as they brushed the top of the undergrowth.

“You're not Mr. Wind, are you?” Maria asked indignantly. She stretched her arm up and waved her wand to-and-fro in front of its face. It quivered and jostled, stopping in place, its frame creaking like the old trees around them. It didn't speak.

She placed her hands on her hips. “Well then, if you're not Mr. Wind, who are you?”

The thing swayed its head steadily from side to side, nattering its teeth and swiping its claws together with a thin shushing sound. Maria saw its mouth, full of needles, glinting in the last rays of sunlight, and suddenly felt a bit frightened.

“Wha-what is it? Are you hungry?... I-I can make you some food!” She waved her stick in front of the shadowy thing. “With my wand, ca-cause I'm the autumn fairy – see?”

It croaked and clicked, tilting its strange head curiously, swaying a long skeletal tail behind it as it extended one of its elongated fingers to touch the leaf at the end. After a pause, there was a blur of movement as it took a bite out of the leaf.

Maria gasped, then giggled. “Silly! The wand isn't the food! Here, let me show you!” The little girl wiggled her bottom, did another twirl and said a few magical words. “Abbu gannu, pucoos hoocus, help the Mister have some foodus!” The creature was still again, as was Maria, as they both waited for something to happen. In the silence, a soft rustle could be heard again as the wind blew amongst the top branches.

Maria plonked down onto her bottom in front of the slender black thing. “Ohhh!... that's right, my wand is broked.” She sighed, then looked into the blank orbs of the creature. “I'm sorry, Mister... I guess I'm not a very good fairy.”



Without warning, the thing then let out a strange, loud, gurgling noise as it grabbed at Maria's shoulder. She yelled out and closed her eyes, but felt no claws. After a moment, she peeked. The claws now gripped a large spider. The creature emitted a sickly whine, and gobbled up the eight-legged prey.

The young child wiped her forehead and laughed. "Oh, Mister! I thought you were going to eat me, the fairy... but you, um, didn't! Yay!" She paused. "I'm... happy I found you. Even if you're not the wind."

The black creature gibbered, its bones cracking as it twitched and shuffled its dilapidated wings behind its back. It leaned in and nudged against Maria, its rickety limbs surrounding her, smelling of damp earth and rotten fruit.

"Ew, Mister! You need a bath, badly!" She shrank away and pulled a face. "Luckily, fairies love to take baths! Why don't you help me fix my wand and then I can make rain happen onto you!"

The thing looked around disinterestedly, pressing its body against the young girl's side. Maria sighed and patted the ridge of its long, spiny back.

It still hadn't rained. As the red light was washing away to a deep indigo – and as Maria was about to tell the creature off for not paying attention to her – she heard a very familiar voice call out in the distance:

"Maria! MARIA! Where are you? It's time to go home!"

The young girl looked all around her, and then towards the treeline. "MAMA!" she shouted back as loud as she could. "I'M HERE!"

The creature was tensed and quivering, seemingly bothered by the sudden loud noises. Maria, concerned, reached up and stroked its narrow face with her fingertips.

"Hey Mister, it's okay, it's only Mama!" She thought for a moment. "My... magic wand must be just strong enough that I can hear Mummy from a long, long away."

The creature slurped a thin tongue over its claws and groaned in a deep tone, harmonizing again with the distant sounds of the old trees shifting in the wind. She grasped one spindly finger and tugged on its lithe frame.

It offered no resistance as she dragged it behind her, by the claw, towards the gap in the trees where she was sure she heard her mother call. "Come on! I bet Mummy would love to meet a handsome Mister like you! Hehe!" And with that, she proudly brandished her stick, with its bitten-into leaf, leading the black thing through the great, golden forest.

The needles curled up in a wide smile.

