

Waking Up in a Bush

By C. Jade Wyton

Becky's idea to take her dad to the music festival to bond did not go as planned.... It had started out fun; but then it had all gone south when the festival had been attacked by a crazed bard with a magic guitar. Becky and her friends had been the ones to fight the man off— Becky had stolen his weapon, and run away with it to leave him defenceless.... And now, she's waking up in the bush she passed out in, exhausted but relieved that things didn't go too wrong....

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The festival had started out fun.

Awkward, but fun.

Becky was glad both Isa and her dad had been able to make time to go with her. And she was glad her friends had understood that she'd wanted to spend the night with her family instead of them. They'd been encouraging, actually. Which was a relief.

It had been fun to hang out with her dad.

She hadn't believed it, at first.

But she'd asked Ken where he'd wanted to spend the night and the way his face had lit up had made Becky's heart flutter.

They hadn't really talked all that much.

They'd been too distracted, staring at sparklers.

The flashing, sharp light was beautiful.

And for a moment, she'd felt close to her dad.

It was a moment where she'd felt understood.

Like they shared something.

Something was the same within them.

Deep, deep inside them.

It was closer to him than she'd ever felt before.

But then... she'd looked away, as Isa and Ken had begun to talk, and and seen something.

Something terrible.

*Mattel.*

She'd tried so hard to push thoughts of the woman away. But seeing her ex at the festival —seeing her with her new partner— had driven Becky into a panic.

And that panic had been abruptly cut off with blackness, and she'd awoken to find herself surrounded by a green mist; the people around her... ageing.

Her father and Isa... staring ahead at the festival stage.

It had only taken her a moment to realise what had happened.

Zeke.

The man who had been following Malinka around and threatening Portia.

He had cast some sort of... of magic spell on everyone. To hold their attention while he drained them of their life force.

Becky wasn't sure what, exactly, had snapped her out of her trance. But something had.

She remembered screaming, though, as she saw Zeke. He was... something else. Other than human. White bone shone in the stage light; slowly vanishing under forming skin and muscle grown from the green, life-stealing smoke.

Becky hadn't stopped screaming, even as she'd known that she had to do something.

So she'd bolted onto the stage, passing Malinka as the tabaxi collected a microphone, and tackled Zeke, trying to knock him down.

He'd managed to stay upright, but had stopped playing as she wrestled him; trying to jam her hands wherever seemed to make him most irritated.

Then, suddenly, there was a gust of magic wind and the horrid smoke cleared— And Portia was suddenly on Zeke as well.

The combined weight of the girls knocked Zeke down as the smoke-spell had worn off and he'd begun to slowly melt back into bone.

And then, the screech.

*Oh, god it had been loud!*

Malinka had jammed a live mic directly into a speaker, creating a feedback loop that had made Zeke's magic backfire; it sent more than half of the crowd running in a confused, frantic state of uncontrollable fear.

Becky only had time to catch a quick glimpse of her family before Zeke had used his guitar to cast another spell that had knocked the wind out of her and thrown her and Portia backwards.

It was a horrifying pain. A jolt that made every fearful instinct inside her activate— A throbbing whiplash over her entire body, that made her head spin and brought back horrible, horrible memories of her accident.

She'd lay there, terrified and stunned, as Zeke pulled himself up to his full height and readied his guitar for another attack....

And then: the hammer.

It flew in out of nowhere, cracking against the back of Zeke's head and sending him back to the floor in a screaming, swearing, bleeding heap.

Becky barely had time to see Adam rushing towards her before she'd noticed that, the moment Zeke had dropped his guitar, his spell had worn off the crowd.

She'd had a thought, then.

It hadn't been a complex thought. But she considered it one of the smartest thoughts she'd ever had.

Guitar was bad.

Guitar was on ground.

Take guitar.

*Run.*

And she had.

Mustering up all of her energy and adrenaline, she had run faster than she had ever managed to run before— Zeke's heavy guitar in tow.

She'd heard shouting behind her as she'd bolted through the crowd and vanished into the woods.

She'd run.

And she'd run.

And she'd run and run and run with that thing.

No idea where she was going until she'd stumbled into the graveyard, literally miles away from where she'd began, and collapsed in a heap.

She'd been running for at least half an hour, if not a full hour. And at a pace she'd never pushed herself to go before.

But she now had Zeke's weapon.

And she hoped that Adam and the girls were alright....

Luckily, checking her phone confirmed it. A message from Adam, telling her they'd beaten Zeke and asking if she was okay....

She hadn't time to reply before she heard muttering and ducked down to hide.

She'd seen then that, though they'd *beaten* Zeke, he was still alive. Bloody and wounded, he stumbled into the graveyard and muttered furiously— Only to be interrupted by Romero.

It had made Becky's blood run cold.

Romero, and Zeke.

The two people who had threatened her friends' lives.

Were *talking*.

And Romero had *complimented* Zeke on what he had done!

Becky knew it!

Becky knew Romero hadn't changed! That he couldn't be trusted!

So she'd taken a photo, as best she could without her flash, and snuck away to head home.

But she was exhausted.

And halfway home, the memory of seeing Mattel came back and....

All she had the energy to do, then, was stumble into the nearest yard and lay down in a bush.

And now, here she was. Laying a bush. Blinking herself awake with sticks and twigs poking into her from all sides as Isa and her father fussed over her.

'We were so worried!' Ken exclaimed, throwing his arms around Becky and squeezing her tightly. 'We— We didn't know what happened to you! I thought maybe, for a moment, you'd found Jareth or Katie or Adam and wandered off with them but— But you never came home! And then you weren't replying! And after how weird the whole night was— We had to track your phone to find you!'

Becky smacked her lips and blinked slowly. 'No, I.... Do you... not remember what happened?'

'No,' Isa let out a deep breath, and joined the hug. 'No! Just that— That you vanished!'

'Zeke,' Becky replied, sleepily. 'Cast a spell.'

'What?' Isa asked.

'He was... magic,' Becky shook her head, and pulled out her phone as it buzzed. 'Mmmm-messages,' she mumbled, typing slowly and speaking out loud as she did. 'I'm... okay.'

She sent the message to the still-active, and very concerned group chat; and was met with a flurry of relief.

Apparently she was the only one of her friends completely unaccounted for after the *weirdness* of the night.

Becky sniffed.

35 missed calls?

She checked who they were from.

Ken. Isa. Adam. One from Malinka—

And twenty-two from Jareth.

‘Becky, we should go home,’ said Ken.

But then her phone lit up with Jareth’s name, and she answered it instead of her dad.

‘Hey,’ she muttered.

‘Becky!’ Jareth exclaimed back. ‘Oh my god. Oh, my god. Are you okay?! I’ve been worried sick! I-I-I don’t know what happened, but everyone was freaking out after the festival! And then you weren’t replying and— And I—’

Becky heard Jareth sniff, and adjusted her grip on her phone. ‘Are you okay? Are you... crying?’

Another sniff, and she heard his voice waver. ‘I... yeah. I was really scared something happened to you.’

‘I’m sorry...’ Becky apologised. As she did, she felt her father’s hand on her shoulder.

‘It’s okay it’s just— I was worried,’ Jareth let out a deep breath. ‘If anything happened to you I don’t know what I’d do.’

‘I’m... I’m okay, though,’ she reassured, quietly. ‘I’m with my dad and Isa.’

‘Okay.... Okay,’ Jareth let out another breath. ‘As long as you’re safe....’

‘I am,’ Becky promised. Then, she turned the night over in her mind.

She knew what had happened.

She felt like... she should tell Jareth.

She still hadn’t told him about Romero.

‘Um... will you come over tomorrow?’ the question was out of Becky before she knew she was even saying it. ‘I want to talk to you about... some stuff.’

‘Y... Yeah, sure,’ Jareth said. ‘I’ll be over first thing in the morning, okay— Or I can come now—’

‘Don’t drive,’ Becky said, firmly. ‘Not while you’re upset. That’s... it’s not safe.’

‘Okay, I won’t drive,’ Jareth promised. ‘I’ll... I’ll get some sleep. I think I need it.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ Becky agreed. ‘Tonight was a lot.... See you then. I love you.’

‘I love you too,’ Jareth sighed, his exhaustion breaking through into his voice. ‘Good night.’

‘Good night,’ Becky echoed, before hanging up.

‘Jareth?’ Isa asked, gently.

Becky nodded.

‘Ah,’ Ken breathed as he tried to guide Becky away from the bush. ‘Let’s head home—’

‘Wait, I need to get...’ Becky trailed off as she went back to the bush. She quickly searched the it, letting out a sigh of relief when she found the guitar.

‘Wait— Wait, what is that?’ Isa asked. ‘Where did you—’

‘Bought it,’ Becky quickly lied. ‘From some guy at the festival.’

Isa’s eyes narrowed, and Becky knew the drow knew she was lying.

Isa had been there with her the entire time, up until she’d been hypnotised. And she’d known Becky had spent almost the entire time staring at sparklers with

her father....

But Isa didn't say anything. Instead, she motioned for Becky to come to her, and gently put her arm around the young woman to lead her to the car.

'You look exhausted,' Isa told her. 'More exhausted than anyone else did after.... *Whatever* happened....'

Becky swallowed as she clambered into the front seat, and fiddled with her belt for a moment before clicking it on.

She couldn't meet Isa's eye as she sat in the driver's seat; instead, she looked away guiltily and bit her lip.

'Becky?' Ken asked, slowly. 'Do you....'

He trailed off as Becky glanced at him through the rear view mirror.

Then, his brow furrowed in concern.

'You do, don't you?' he stated. 'You saw what happened.'

'Yes,' Becky answered. 'It was a guy. Zeke. He's been hanging around town for a while but... he did something. Hypnotised everyone. And then tried to....'

It caught in her throat, and she couldn't finish.

'Becky? What did he do?' Isa asked. 'Did he hurt you?'

'A little,' Becky said, honestly— Flinching as Isa's grip on the steering wheel tightened. 'But I was more scared about what he was doing to you.'

Ken and Isa shared a look through the mirror, before casting their eyes back to Becky.

'What did he do?' Isa asked.

'He was... making you old,' she said. She almost said more —almost explained his flesh melting off his face as he deteriorated into a corpse— but decided against it at the last second. 'Like... with magic. I don't know why.'

Another shared glance between the two older elves, and Becky shrunk into her seat.

'We tried to stop him. Me and Portia and Malinka and Adam,' she told them.

'And then he...' she paused, pulling a face. 'He *hissed* at me.'

'He did?'

'Yeah. And I snarled back. Like...' Becky imitated herself; scrunching her face into a scowl and snarling loudly.

That got a chuckle out of Ken. 'You haven't done that since you were eight.'

'Hm...' she gave a yawn, and rubbed her eyes. 'I don't know why I did. It was just a reaction. I was... really scared. But now I'm just tired.'

'Adrenaline,' Isa commented, side-eyeing Becky with concern. 'Are you okay? You're not hurt?'

'Just tired,' Becky repeated.

'Good,' Isa sighed. '*Thank god*.... You get some sleep. We'll wake you when we get home.'

'Mm. Okay....'

—END—

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