

The Spring



The Spring

Once upon a time there was a beautiful spring of cool, fresh water which lay in the clearing of a deep, dark wood. There was a high formation of rocks out of which the spring bubbled and cascaded down into a small pond below. Around the water's edge flowers bloomed in the most extraordinary colors and shapes, the like of which could not be found anywhere else. And, upon the rock's point, grew the most stunning blue flowers.

Now this spring was the home of the water nymph, Naila, who had a duty to keep the water ever flowing lest it become stagnant. The fairies would often come to visit her here, for there were fewer nymphs left in the world in those days and, without their protection, much of the surrounding forest had gone untended for many years and was grown wild and fearsome.

For this reason, Naila's spring had become something of an oasis and a haven to the fairies. It kept them hidden from men would delighted in capturing the little creatures for their magical powers. Here they were safe for none now dared to venture deeply enough into the forest to find them.

There was only one mortal brave enough to walk freely in that place. Djemil was a hunter who feared neither the dark, forbidding woods nor the ferocious creatures that lived there. He had slain the werewolves and bugbears that had been raised by the Fairy of Death, and never retreated from a fight.

Naila had seen him often in his travels, silently admiring his courage. She was greatly indebted to him for, at times, it was only the tip of his spear or the point of his arrows which kept the monsters away from her sacred spring. In time that admiration grew into a profound fondness which, in turn, blossomed into love.

One day, Naila was visited by Nexo, the Fairy of Death. His wicked mistress Carabosse had given Nexo rule over the depths of the forest and, as the strength of the nymphs and dryads waned, his power and dominion grew. All that remained beyond his reach was the spring and he could not even approach it for it was guarded by Naila and was the antithesis of his power.

The nymph fascinated him for she was the very embodiment of life and sound and movement, while he was stillness and silence and death. Nexo knew well Naila's fondness for the mortal hunter and he mocked her, saying, "This man of the human world does not belong here, nor you in his world. He and his kind are creatures of a baser make than we and are unworthy even of our attention." But he said this knowing it would stir feelings within her; feelings of love which, Nexo knew, bred vulnerability.

Naila had heard the tauntings of the Death Fairy before and had learned to ignore them. But, when she was not careful to direct them to her duties of guiding the waters and tending the flowers, her thoughts strayed often to Djemil. One morning the young hunter was tracking the great carrion birds who nested in the thistle trees. A flock of these fiends was haunting the edge of the woods and was threatening a nearby village. As always his hunt took him deep into the forest, even to the clearing where Naila's spring sat. Tired and thirsty from his work, Djemil knelt by the spring and took many draughts of its clear water. When his thirst had been quenched

he peered up at the tower of rocks and spied the most magnificent blue flower; a kind which he had never seen or heard of before.

He resolved to climb the rocks and inspect it more closely. The stones were slick with the ever flowing water but Djemil was a fearless and steady climber. When he reached the top he found himself beside a deep, boisterous well, encircled by the big round stones and, within the water, sat a woman.

She possessed a rare beauty though she was unlike any girl Djemil had ever seen. Her skin was the color of the pale afternoon sky; her hair seafoam white and her eyes like sapphires. Her delicate body was clothed in a material richer and yet slighter than any cloth to be found even in the wardrobe of an empress, and was lined all about with a bubbling fringe like the kind that clings to the ring of a ripple.

She lay still and silent, tending the remarkable blue petaled flowers, unaware of Djemil's presence. But the hunter's boot slipped just slightly from the wet face of one of the rocks and the noise startled the nymph. She looked into his face and was seized with fear; fear she had never felt before, not in the presence of Nexo nor any of his unnatural creations.

But Djemil held up his hands and said, "Do not be afraid. I won't harm you. I came only to see these wondrous flowers of yours. I am Djemil, the hunter."

"I know who you are," Naila said, at last gathering the courage to speak. "I have seen you here before and I must thank you for keeping the Death Fairy's beasts from my spring." She had often thought of introducing herself to the boy but always the fear of Nexo's warnings kept her from revealing her presence. "I am Naila, the water nymph." She stared deeply into his gaze and felt a fascination growing between them. "If you wish," she said, picking one of the blue flowers from between the rocks. "You may have one. They only grow here and their aroma is most enchanting."

But before she could hand it to him, an evil sound reverberated through the air. A murder of the black-feathered carrion birds appeared above the treetops, drawing near to the spring. They were monstrous creatures with rows of razor teeth and talons that could skewer a full-grown man. But Djemil was not afraid of them. He stepped in front of Naila and, swiftly drawing his bow sent an arrow directly to the heart of the beast at the head of the flock. The others circled the hunter and the nymph but, after Djemil had shot three more out of the skies, the remaining monsters turned tail and fled back to their nests. Naila breathed a sigh of relief for, though things were every day becoming more dangerous for her little domain, Djemil had once again saved her.

He did not linger long that day but, from that point on, he came often to the spring to visit her. She had lived a long time and had much to tell of the world in ages past and he loved to listen to her stories. She told him of the golden age of the forest when her kind was many and the woods were bright and filled with life. "My father was once protector of all the water courses in this land but he is gone and his children are now few." She could tell that Djemil had grown sad at hearing of the waning of her world so she changed the subject. "Tell me of the human world."

Djemil told her many stories of his family and friends and of the village where he was raised and Naila was most interested in hearing about the way mortals lived. Every day she would eagerly await a story from him about the customs of men or what their work was like or if they ever fell in love. "Love is something I have not yet found," he told her. "Always my work

keeps me on the solitary path; a path that I would lead no woman upon for it is cruel and painful.”

“Is it not more painful to walk alone forever?” She asked him one morning. “Would you truly choose the lonely road if someone offered you another?” But Djemil made no answer for his gaze was now fixed elsewhere.

That day a caravan was coming through the woods, made up of a score of richly armored soldiers leading a cart with a silken canopy. They were a royal escort, guiding the beautiful Princess Nouredda to the neighboring kingdom where she was to marry the King. They had become dreadfully lost and wound up beside Naila’s spring. Nouredda, who was weary of travel and had little patience for her servants’ poor sense of direction, commanded them to stop and fetch her water from the spring.

As she sipped the water, Nouredda peered out from her canopy and saw the young hunter, Djemil, standing upon the rocks. Djemil was transfixed by her loveliness and regal grace. She was, after all, hailed as the most exquisite maiden in the land. She saw the stunning flowers which grew beside the hunter’s feet and commanded her servants to climb the rock and pick one for her. But her guards were very much afraid at being so deep in the forest and would go no nearer to the enchanted spring.

“You, there,” she called to Djemil who was entranced by her delicate face. “Pick me one of those flowers, would you?” He turned toward Naila but the nymph had vanished, so he stooped down, picked the flower from the rock and stepped quickly down to hand it to the princess. But he withheld the girl’s prize for a moment and she asked, “What is your price?”

“Only a kiss,” replied Djemil. At this, Nouredda grew angry.

“A dire price, indeed, that a princess, betrothed to the noblest of nobility, would even think of lowering her royal lips to those of a shabby hunter!”

“But the king is old and frail,” Djemil protested. “Am I really such a poor alternative to an old man?”

“He is old, it is true, but he owns gold and jewels that shine more brilliantly than a handsome face.” With that she commanded the caravan to continue onward to the king’s castle. But, before she turned away, Djemil thought he had caught an admiring glance or two.

Naila watched this exchange from the silent waters of her spring and felt more than a little pleasure at watching the princess move on, though it pained her to see Djemil treated so harshly.

“Did you see her?” he asked as he carried the flower back up the rocks. “She was the most radiant woman I have ever beheld.” Naila stared blankly at the blue flower in his hands as she listened to his seemingly endless praise of the princess. “I could die a happy man if only she would be my wife. But, alas, she is betrothed to a wealthy king.”

“I only wish I could help you,” replied Naila. Her voice, which was once vibrant and bold had grown small. Very small indeed.

“Perhaps you can,” said Djemil suddenly. He looked deeply into her cool blue eyes and said, “You are very beautiful, Naila. You are a vision of loveliness unparalleled by any mortal woman.” Her heart swelled with tenderness. “If the king were to see you before his marriage to Nouredda, he would surely call the wedding off and she would be free of her obligation.”

It wounded her to think that the man she would give her heart to could not give his in return. It wounded her to think that Nexo's words were true. But, more than anything else, the pain of denying the young hunter what he desired was something Naila simply could not bear. "Lead me to the King's castle," she said at last. "and I shall break his engagement to Noureda." Djemil was overjoyed and, with the blue flower in hand, he and Naila at once left the spring.

As soon as the nymph was gone from that sacred place, however, Nexo the Death Fairy came with his children and they claimed Naila's domain as their own. At last the final bastion of life was gone from the woods and the spring was his.

The palace of the King was a grand sight; towers piercing the sky and bold silken banners caught high by the wind, displaying the crest and royal colors of this most ancient and noble kingdom. The city surrounding sparkled with the wealth of gold and precious stones. It was a country beyond compare and it would be Noureda's new home.

The King had ordered all the chambers and halls of the palace to be arrayed in the most lavish of decorum in honor of his wedding to the beautiful princess. The walls and floor were covered in velvet, dyed in Noureda's favorite colors. It was sure to be a grand occasion and the King, himself, sat eagerly on his throne awaiting his bride to be.

When Naila and Djemil arrived at the city gates, a great procession of guests had already formed outside the palace, stretching across the golden bridge that spanned the royal channel and met the gilded castle doors. There were dignitaries from many continents, bearing gifts both costly and rare. Nobles from across the world came in their finest and richest apparel, and with their servants and attendants close at hand.

As Djemil and Naila drew closer to palace walls they could hear sweet music floating out of every window. Surely there was an entrance to the great hall close by. To their left was a marble walkway which led through the garden; a wondrous place where rare and exotic flowers were carefully tended. As they explored they came across many statues of the King as well as one of Noureda, newly constructed and surrounded by fresh white roses. Nearby Djemil found a wide set of stairs leading up to the side of the palace and a pair of open doors. "Come, Naila," he said eagerly. "This way is open to us."

But Naila knew better than to trust so slim a hope and tried to call him back. However, before the lovestruck hunter could land one foot across the threshold of the doorway, he found a set of crossed pikes barring his path and a pair of large and brutish guards sneering at him. Djemil was nearly tempted to draw his hunting dagger and fight his way in, so strong was his desire to see Noureda, but faithful Naila held him back and calmed him. The guards slammed the doors and bolted them shut with an iron groan. "Fear not, dear one," Naila said gently placing her cool blue hand on his shoulder. "There must be another way inside and we will find it."

"But the entrances are all watched! It is a hopeless endeavor!" Djemil was half right. The King wouldn't allow anyone to enter the palace without an invitation. His wedding was far too important to jeopardize and his guards would give their lives to ensure that his royal will was enforced. "Can't you call upon your magic to overpower the soldiers or to cause us to walk unseen by them?"

"I'm afraid not," she said looking away fearfully. "My powers while away from the spring are limited and I must use them sparingly. If I were to cast such a spell of invisibility I

would have no power left to accomplish what we set out to do.” Djemil bitterly agreed with her point. Naila looked across the courtyard to the golden bridge where the royal procession continued. Nouredda’s servants were leading her in now; carrying her upon her veiled couch. Djemil stared longingly at his beloved princess and despaired.

“How can we possibly get inside now?”

“Surely there must be some way,” Naila responded, her eye catching a lone dignitary at the edge of the garden. He was hurrying toward the line of marching guests, flustered at apparently having been separated from the rest of his group. He was rather a fat and, to her thinking, not a very clever man. He was, however, very richly dressed in silken pants, a scarlet vest embroidered with gold and a turban set with colorful feathers and sparkling jewels.

The nymph motioned Djemil to follow her and, approaching the man, called out, “Wait, my friend!” The fat dignitary halted when he saw the young hunter and the strange but beautiful woman beside him. “Where do you go in such a hurry?”

“I am late for the King’s wedding to the Princess Nouredda and I must rush to regroup with my caravan! I wandered away only momentarily to admire the flowers when I became lost in the winding paths of the garden.” He was breathing heavily from exhaustion and his thick black mustache was slick with perspiration. “Now please, you must detain me no further!” The man resumed his desperate flight but was called back once again by Naila.

“Please wait! I fear for your life and the lives of all inside!” Now the man stopped in his tracks and turned toward the nymph in dread. “I did not wish to alarm you,” she said, placing her hands upon her breast. “but I felt you must know.”

“What?” The man begged with terror surfacing in his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Your clothes are afflicted with a terrible curse!”

“What do you mean?” he demanded with an air indignant air. “These are some of the finest raiments gold can buy!”

“But this vest is dyed with the blood of the bolgs,” she shouted in horror. “and the cloth of your turban is from the vault of the restless pharaoh! And this gold and ruby studded belt is the worst of all, for it comes from the treasury of the Demon Kingdom of Wak-Wak!” The man was most perturbed at having been told such absurd lies but Naila begged him to inspect the garb himself. Reluctantly he did so, expecting to find nothing, but, by some minor enchantment, Naila made it so that the man saw an unholy power bound to the threads of his clothing and he came to believe her stories.

“Please help me,” he pleaded with her. “I cannot enter the palace in these cursed threads! What can I do?”

“I cannot lift the curse,” she explained. “but my companion would be willing to trade his clothing for yours, for he fears no dark magic.” The man was skeptical when he saw Djemil’s shabby clothing and did not relish the idea of appearing before the King so poorly dressed. “No matter how terrible or bloodcurdling this curse may be, he shall bear it nobly.” Finally, the terrified dignitary handed over his vest and turban and belt and grudgingly accepted Djemil’s leathern vest and short wolf-skin cloak, though he was obviously repulsed by them. But he bowed gratefully and left Naila and Djemil, and his own cursed garments, behind.

“Truly that was magic,” Djemil remarked, donning the dignitary’s clothing. Naila thought he looked very noble in such rich dress and found that her fondness for him had grown to an

almost painful level. She wondered now what she was doing. Was she really giving him away? Or had she just accepted that he was never hers to begin with? She did not know but, admiring him in his princely clothes; it was hurting her very deeply. That was all she knew.

“We must hurry now to the line of guests,” she said, turning away from him.

“But I have no gift to present,” he objected. “How can I pass as a guest if I come empty-handed?”

She gave him the blue flower and said, “This will be your gift. When you come before the King, cast the flower upon the ground and I shall do the rest.”

“But where will you be? Surely you are staying with me.”

She smiled lovingly at him and said, “Yes. I will be with you, but I must hide myself until the time is right.” A bell was sounded at the front gate of the palace and she motioned for him to make haste. Reluctantly, he bid her goodbye and tried to think only of the moment when his Princess would finally be his.

Though he was fearless in the face of death, Djemil was a little apprehensive about Naila’s plan. But, as he approached the gates, the guards ushered him in without a word and he bowed regally as would be expected of a royal guest. The main hall of the palace was unlike anything he had ever seen before and he marveled at every inch of it. The marble walls were inlaid with bright jade and covered in gold with jeweled settings. Great twisting columns rose up to the vaulted ceiling with scenes of the old kingdom’s long and storied history etched into them.

Djemil followed the seemingly endless line of guests through hall after hall until the procession ended in the massive throne room where the King was seated upon his chair of gold and ivory. The hunter carefully held the blue flower to his chest and did his utmost to protect it from the crowds of people on all sides of him, all the while peering over heads and shoulders to catch a glimpse of Noureda. There she was, on her silken couch, resting beside the King’s throne and looking as if she were in a different world altogether.

At his first opportunity, Djemil found a seat in the assemblage and waited for the celebration to begin. He worried that the marriage would take place before he could present the flower to the King but Naila assured him that the gifts would be given before the ceremony and Djemil trusted her implicitly. A gong was sounded and the King rose, bidding Noureda to rise with him. She was a vision of incomprehensible grace and glittered more brilliantly than any gem in the castle. The King thanked his beloved guests for their presence on the joyous occasion and presented to them their future queen who, he was sure, they would come to love almost as deeply as he loved her.

All Djemil could do was stare down at the flower of his salvation and have faith that everything would work out. With the celebration officially underway, the King summoned his musicians and a trio of his harem’s finest dancers to perform, followed by a team of the kingdom’s most talented acrobats and magicians. It was a truly unique spectacle for all to behold but Djemil saw none of it for always his gaze was on Noureda.

Finally a trumpet was sounded and, the performance finished, the presenters were called up to bring their gifts before the throne. Djemil eagerly rose and joined the line of people, considering his gift to be the most precious of all. Many brought chests of gold and stores of jewels; some brought rich linens and embroidered cloths from distant lands. Others brought rare and delicious spices and sweet wines. However the King was most surprised when Djemil

appeared and, bowing before him, presented only a strange blue flower the like of which he had never seen before. Nouredda seemed quite shocked and more than a little annoyed once she recognized him but, for some reason, did not compromise his charade.

“Who are you, friend, and what is the meaning of this flower?” the King inquired, puzzled.

He bowed low and said, “I am Djemil of the Land of the Final Spring and I give to you this, the rarest gift in all the world. It is the blue flower which grows only in the enchanted domain of Naila; last daughter of the River King.” With a final motion, he cast the flower upon the floor before the throne and a cool blue light radiated from it. He stepped aside as the petals grew and twisted and inverted and, out from its midst, rose the delicate and beautiful form of Naila.

Immediately she began to dance before the King; her white hair circling around her like the edge of a whirlpool. Her seafoam dress sparkled as the dew reflected the light all about her and her graceful steps were more precise than any dancer in the land. Her exotic beauty and magical presence fascinated the King in a way he could not understand and, for a moment, it was as if he were under a spell.

When her dance was complete she genuflected daintily and the King rose to take her hand, asking, “What name could be possessed by so exquisite a creature as you, my dear?”

“I am called Naila, my Lord, and I have come many leagues from my homeland to meet you, for it is said that yours is the finest kingdom in all the world.”

“I fear you have heard wrong, for it was a sorry place before you arrived and it shall be again unless you agree to remain here with me.” At this, Nouredda became furious and glowered at Djemil. “Would you become my queen?” the King requested of Naila, who glanced apprehensively at her beloved hunter and nodded slightly. “Excellent! Then this will truly be a day of jubilation for all the land and, I am certain it shall stand as the happiest day of my life!”

At this, Nouredda rose with a shriek and leaped from the dais, gripping her wedding dress, and attempted to flee the palace. Djemil gripped her hand and said, “Why do you rage like this? I have freed you! I know you had no feelings for the King. Is his wealth and station really worth more to you than the love that I can give you?” She glared at him and, without a word, turned and dashed out of the throne room. Djemil followed close behind and, still gripping the King’s hands, Naila could do nothing but watch them leave and ponder what she had done.

Nouredda fled the city and ran as far as she could. She did not know where she was going, exactly, but she ran always in the direction of home. This path took her deep into the forest and it was not long before she had become lost in its dark and twisting midst. But Djemil was close at hand and the monsters dared not come forward to molest either he or Nouredda. Eventually she found herself in the clearing by the spring and she could run no more.

“Please do not be angry with me, Nouredda,” Djemil begged her. “I did this only because I love you and I know that, more than gold and jewels, you deserve to have someone who will live and die for you!”

“What do you know of me?” she demanded. “You have utterly destroyed my life and you haven’t even the decency to let me alone now!”

“It was never my intention to hurt you. Your marriage to the King would be a rich one, but a lonely one. I only wished to save you from that.”

“You know nothing about it,” she said, kneeling beside the spring. She was overcome now with anger and exhaustion, and had grown frightfully thirsty. So greatly was she distressed that she did not notice that the waters had become black and stagnant since she been there last.

But Djemil did notice and tried to warn her. He was too late, however, and Nouredda took it into her cupped hands and drank. She rose slowly, turned to him and he could see her anger fade away as it was gradually overcome with sorrow and then great pain. With tears welling in her now hazy eyes, she stepped toward him and fell to the ground. Swiftly he flew to her side and tried to revive her but she made no answer. Her gaze was scattered and, though she still drew breath, it had grown slow and faint.

When Naila arrived, she found that the waters of her spring had been corrupted and poisoned and all the grove was defiled. The abominable carrion birds were circling overhead; death was in the air. She found Nouredda barely clinging to life and Djemil mourning over her. Now she was seeing the fruits of her folly and she regretted ever having left her spring. Once Djemil became aware of her presence, he ran to Naila and, taking her hands into his, begged her upon his knees to use whatever power she had to save his beloved Nouredda.

“She is still and cold as the grave, Naila! You must help her!”

Naila turned her gaze toward the dying form of Nouredda and the blood turned to ice in her veins as a sense of futility overcame her. “I’m sorry, Djemil,” she said, barely above a hoarse whisper. “I don’t know if there is anything I can do.”

“But you have performed miracles,” he said, rising and embracing her. “There must be something you can do.” He placed his head upon her shoulder and wept.

“I can lend a wilting flower the will to stand straight but there comes a time when all flowers must die and that is not within my power to change.” The man she loved was holding her tightly now and she could feel his tears falling upon her bare shoulder. She loved him more than she thought she could love anything and all she ever wanted was to embrace him and to share both his joy and his pain. Now they were together at last and never before had she felt so cold and lifeless. The image of poor Nouredda was more than the nymph could stand. She would rather die than force Djemil and this girl to suffer for her mistakes.

Suddenly a torrent of anger washed over her like a hot ocean current and she tore herself away from Djemil. With a terrible ire she called, “Reveal yourself, Nexo, Fairy of Death!” The sky above the grove, already kissing dusk, grew darker still as the sound of a thousand fluttering wings and the clicking of a thousand gnawing teeth rose up around them. In an instant, with a host of malevolent korrigans flanking him, Nexo the Death Fairy appeared in his black raiment and tightly gripping his sickle-headed rod. His wings were like two grasping, thorny claws which rose out of his back and his face was hidden behind the horned visage of a skull.

“Does my gift not please you, Naila?” the evil fairy taunted. “Was not your great love stronger before the interference of this unwanted woman?”

“My love has never suffered as dreadfully as this moment, Nexo. My heart breaks now, not for myself, but for Nouredda. You must leave her out of this.”

“Impossible!” He lurched over to the girl’s body and bent over her. “She has drunk of the black waters and she has passed into my domain.” He took Nouredda by the hand and, from her

motionless body, raised the ghastly image of her sad spirit. Her face was without joy or love or even pain as she danced unwilling with the fairy. "She shall not return to your beloved hunter or to any in this world," he said, waving a hand over her ghost and causing it to fade from view.

Djemil was seized with an unquenchable rage now and charged toward Nexo, drawing his long-bladed knife. With but a gesture, the Death Fairy cast the distraught hunter aside and brought him reeling to the ground; the korrigans reveling in his anguish.

"Enough of this, Nexo," Naila shouted, summoning a strength she rarely called upon. "Death and sorrow and agony are the tenets of your kingdom and you know them well." Her voice grew fainter now as she looked toward Djemil who, wracked with pain, was crawling over to Nouredda's body, hoping to die with her when the time came. Naila gently touched her hands to the heart-shaped sapphire broach which was set upon her breast and tears welled in her eyes. "You know much, Nexo, but you do not know all. There is one way to save her."

"It cannot be done," he roared, gripping her arm savagely. "She belongs to me and no magic within your skill can take her from me!"

"You are right," she responded with a nod, pulling herself from his icy grip. "It is not within my skill to reverse this evil curse but that does not mean there is nothing I can do to save her." The fairies appeared now from their hiding places and flocked around Naila as she strode over to the spring. She placed the tips of her fingers into the blackened water and it became clear, blue and boisterous once again. "I defy your wretchedness with all my being. All that I am; all that I have, whatever little it may be, will save all that you destroy." She touched the broach again and repeated, "All that I am."

The fairies knew the nymph's mind and pleaded with her, tears streaming from their little eyes. "Do not do this, Naila! They are mortals and must all be subject to Nexo's will someday. You must not do this!" But their cries fell on deaf ears and Naila was unswayed. She knelt down beside Nouredda and, weeping silently, placed her lips upon the girl's forehead.

"It is time for you to awaken, Nouredda," she said, removing the sapphire broach from her breast and placing it over Nouredda's heart. "If my skill and magic cannot call you back, then I trade all that I am to do so." She leaned in close to the girl's ear and whispered, "You must be Djemil's love now, and you must walk with him all his days and never leave him." Slowly the princess's eyes opened and she stared lovingly at Djemil. Now she saw in him, not a poor hunter, but the man she would gladly share her life with for as long as life remained to her.

And once Djemil realized what had happened he cried for joy and took his beloved Nouredda into his arms. They arose together and the power of their love frightened Nexo so that the Death Fairy drew himself away. But what terrified him more than their love was Naila's. Neither Djemil nor Nouredda understood what the water nymph had done but Nexo understood all too well. His towering form trembled with fear as he looked upon her; she, who was as ancient as the world was wide. She, who tended the rivers immortal, living just as eternally as they. She, who was now dying because her life unending would be one of everlasting misery if she allowed Nouredda to die this day. Nexo released a wail, forgetting his desire for the spring or Naila's domain altogether. He vanished from the grove, surely fleeing to his Black Queen Carabosse, and he never dared return.

And Naila, hiding her weariness, embraced the two lovers and kissed them both gently upon the cheeks. She placed a trembling hand against the side of Nouredda's face and smiled

proudly upon the woman who would care for her treasured Djemil in her stead. Then, the man she loved so deeply, she embraced with tears cascading from her once fathomless blue eyes. Djemil did not know this, but they were not so deep now.

When she pulled away, she clasped their hands together and granted them all her blessings. “Go now, both of you, and live only for each other. You will be happy. That I can promise.”

“Come with us, Naila,” Djemil said, pleadingly. “You have been the dearest of friends to me and Noureda and I would wish nothing more than for you to remain with us.”

But Naila shook her white-tressed head and smiled. “No, Djemil. If I leave,” her voice became hoarse for a moment. “Who will tend the spring in my absence?” She motioned toward the edge of the forest. “You and Noureda must walk your own path, just as I must adhere to mine. Go, then, and be happy.” They thanked her many times, never knowing the depths of her love for them, and began their journey out of the grove. As soon as they had turned away, Naila ceased her charade and gripped her breast in pain. She had done her best to hide it and neither of her friends had noticed her trembling limbs or the way the color had gradually bled from her skin. Now she had no reason to hide it and stepped wearily toward the edge of the spring. The waters leapt playfully, seeming so much more alive beside the limping and languishing form of the once strong nymph.

The fairies all flocked around her, weeping piteously for her. But Naila was not sad. She turned once more, requiring much strain to do so, and watched the distant forms of Djemil and Noureda as they disappeared into the waning light of the sunset. Naila closed her eyes now and a smile spread over her pallid face. She had made him happy and now, at the edge of a darkness she was never meant to touch, she was filled with a great contentment. Only three words left her lips in that moment and they were barely audible, yet they could be heard beyond the forest and in all the lands surrounding. “I love you.”

Then Naila fell backward into the spring and, with a single great splash, her body faded away and she became one with the water. Her arms and her legs and every delicate line of her blissful face had vanished now, never to be seen again. And the fairies lamented at the water’s edge as they said goodbye to the last of the nymphs. The once bubbling water could be joyful no more and so ceased its movement altogether and, within moments, the spring had all but dried up. The waterfall was silent now and the pond below had shriveled and disappeared. All that now remained of Naila’s sacred spring was a single blue flower which the nymph had once tended so lovingly. From that day on the fairies kept it alive with their tears and so it would remain there, bright and beautiful as the day Naila called it up from the soil, even unto the end of the world.

THE END