

Winner

A Quilt Unfinished

By Sarah DeLeo

She's running through the woods, it's too dark to see where she's going. The moon is full above her but the trees filter the light out, their heavy branches impeding its path. Her lungs burn, her legs ache, but still she keeps running. Whether it is *from* or *to* something she can't remember, she just knows that she must *keep going*.

She stumbles over a log of wood - didn't see it - and finds herself in a clearing. She pulls herself up, dusts the dew and grass off, and glances around.

She's not alone.

Not far off, near the center of the clearing, a group of people mill around. They *look* like people, at least, with the correct number and position of limbs, but something seems off. It seems off in the way they carry themselves, in the way the moonlight reflects off their skin in a shimmer rather than a glow, in the way their smiles are a bit too sharp when they look her way and meet her eyes -

Oh no. She tries to flee before they come over, but her body is perfectly comfortable where it stands in the faint moonlight, at the edge of the clearing in the dew and mud and quickly growing fog.

She thinks of her parents, her bed, a nice warm fire in the main room after the evening meal.

The people who aren't stand close enough to speak, though she knows she would have heard them if they had spoken from the center.

"What is your name?" one asks. This one is the tallest of the group, its features and wardrobe betraying a status of royalty.

She *tries* not to speak. Her jaw is clenched shut, and she's not sure she could produce sound even if she wanted to. But she is compelled, in the same way her body longed to stay put.

"Elys," she says.

"Elys," the royal repeats, testing it out. She does not like how it sounds, coming from the other. "Thank you."

The party turns away, and she is alone. The moon grows dimmer. The clearing drains of color, and as she steps back, the forest does as well. Soon she stands alone in darkness. Then she is gone as well.

"You shouldn't have given him your name," Mogen says the next morning. They are stitching: Mogen is working on her twelfth quilt, and Elys works on a secret. "Everyone knows you don't give fairies your name."

Elys doesn't fight it. She knows Mogen will not understand. She can't properly explain her compulsion to answer honestly, how *lying* was never an option. "Why do you call them fairies? It was just a dream."

Mogen looks up from her quilt. "Of course they're fairies. You keep having the same dreams. This is how they *work*, Elys, all the books say so."

"They've never seen me before. One *spoke* to me! That's never happened before."

"Well," Mogen flips her hair out of the way and looks back to her quilt. Elys can't help but watch. Mogen is so graceful, all the time. "Maybe they were just waiting. You *are* a young woman now."

"*What?*"

"Why else would they watch over you for so many years? I think they were just waiting for you to grow up so they could properly court you." Mogen continues expertly working her quilt, unaware of Elys's baffled face. "I'm jealous! My parents found me a suitor, so I'll be gone soon."

Elys looks down at the quote she's carefully stitching onto her sampler. The letters are uneven, the flowers have too many leaves, and now she's encountered a new problem: will it be done in time? "Oh."

"Don't tell anyone, but I don't think I want to be married."

Oh.

The night is dark. Mogen stumbles through the underbrush, looking for the clearing Elys described earlier that day. Maybe Elys is right and it *is* just a dream, but Mogen has to know. She'll take any chance she can, but she can *not* be married. Not to him.

Her suitor's hands are too rough, his face too hard, and he is *much* too old. More than that, he plans to leave for the west before the start of the next season. Mogen must make twelve blankets and stitch a great quilt before then. When she finishes the quilts, she will be married. She's nearly done with her last one, and has been for a while. When no one is looking, she's been taking the stitches out to slow her work. Now, though, she's sure someone has caught on.

The clearing is just ahead, and Mogen approaches. As she gets closer she sees the clearing is surrounded by ancient, flat stones in the ground. Within the circle they've created, only grass grows. Mogen doesn't see any people like Elys described. Maybe it really *was* just a dream?

She needs a better look. Maybe the shapes at the far edge of the ring are the people from the night before. Mogen steps into the ring of stones.

Mogen isn't at the door the next day, when Elys comes calling. Her mom answers instead, asking if Elys has seen her because *she* hasn't and she'd really like to question her on the status of her quilts.

Elys doesn't know. No one in the village knows, either. Elys knew Mogen was not happy about marriage, but she wouldn't just run off! At the very least, not without sharing her decision with Elys.

But it seems she has simply *vanished*.

She falls asleep that night with an uneasy feeling deep inside, anxious of a life without Mogen come sooner than planned. Her dreams are, predictably, the same as they've been.

There is one difference this time: in addition to the usual creatures populating her dreams, there is Mogen.

She doesn't seem bound, or imprisoned. She looks like she won an argument. Elys can't help but feel relief at seeing Mogen's smug look, painfully out of place in this dark clearing.

The royal one notices where Elys's eyes have fallen and shifts Mogen out of view slightly.

"Elys," it calls out, using the name that she gave, "Would you like her back?"

Frozen, like before, she can only nod. She would like her back very much.

The royal smiles widely, with too many teeth to be friendly. "How about a trade? We like you, Elys. We don't like this one as much. Why don't you stay here with us - forever - and *she* can go home."

Elys agrees easily. Her parents are just biding their time until they can send her off, anyway, so what's the difference? Surely there will be a bed and warm fire here and, better still, her friend will be free.

Two of the others act as guards and march Mogen to the outside of the ring, where Elys still stands. Mogen pulls against them, fighting and dragging her feet, as she shouts, "Stop! Wait!" She is ignored as the guards keep walking forward.

"What's wrong?" Elys calls out, brain still foggy and dreamlike. She feels thoroughly unsure if this is still a dream, or reality. "You were right. They were courting me."

"Yes," she agrees, "But I can't leave! I can't go back to that life! Please, I can't be married off and leave you behind."

Elys is taken aback, but that makes sense. Mogen hadn't run off just to prove her wrong, she'd run off to *run away*. She'd found what she wanted.

"Wait!" Elys calls out. The guards stop and the royal looks at her. "What if she stays?"

"We like *you*," they say at once.

"Yes, and you will have me, but her as well. I won't stay if she can't."

There is a brief pause where even the forest itself is silent. Then, the guards let go of Mogen.

They rush to each other and embrace. The royal signals them to follow and they do, traveling deeper and deeper into the forest, safe in the company of each other.