



Only the Wind

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Retold Fairy Tales

Elsabeth really did not want to die.

It was a natural inclination, brought on by a short lifetime of fighting wars. A natural inclination she had ignored when she signed up to discover the truth behind where Queen Nina's sons went during the night.

She emptied the cup of drugged wine they had brought her into the refuse basin and shoved it beneath her bed. Then she rested her head against the cold stone of the wall of her chamber, listening to the sounds that came from the adjoining room where the princes had gathered. She could hear whispers, the occasional guffaw, and a snort. But their feet tread without a sound despite their heavy boots, the lithe lightness of both dancers and duellers.

Their door squeaked as it opened. Just as quietly as they, she hopped into her bed, resting on top of a soft blue blanket. She shut her eyes, forcing herself to lie still, just as she had during the war when their camps would be raided and she had to play dead to avoid slaughter. But this time she could at least breathe slowly and evenly, allowing the air to rush over her tongue. She felt the presence of the man in her room and forced her muscles not to tense.

"She's out." Prince Judah's voice, haggard and tense. She listened as he shuffled out of her chamber. As soon as he was gone, she sat up and wrapped the blue blanket around her shoulders. She grimaced as the magic took effect, her stomach sloshing as her limbs slowly went invisible. Throughout the war she had used the army-issued invisibility blankets to keep herself safe from enemy eyes, but the warrior's code had prevented her from

using it as an information-gathering tool. She had no such qualms now.

Not when two women had already died. The queen's proclamation of death for those who failed had quickly weeded out those who might have attempted it as a lark. The nobles had forbidden their daughters from trying, leaving the victory—and the tragedies—to girls like Elisabeth.

She tiptoed to the princes' room. The lock on their door had long since been cut away. She slid inside their chamber without a noise, closing the door behind her.

"Why does she even try?" Benji, the youngest brother, asked.

Inwardly, Elisabeth answered his question, even as his brothers laughed: because there weren't many opportunities for women in the kingdom of Reurlise to be heroes. Because she had nothing to lose. Because she wanted to. Because she was a soldier and still wanted a fight.

She watched as the princes shoved aside their beds, grunting with the effort, to reveal a narrow trap door. Together they hauled the trap door open and descended into darkness.

Shivers ran over Elisabeth's spine. One wrong move, and she would not only die—she would leave space for another desperate, hapless soul to take her place.

With the practiced quiet of a soldier, she ran over the stone floor to the stairwell. She ducked into it just as the youngest prince heaved the door closed so quickly that she had to spring down a step to avoid hitting her head. She didn't realize she'd landed on his cloak until he moved. She yanked her foot off the cloak, but he'd already felt the tug.

"Brothers!" he hissed. The sound echoed in the shrunken space.

Judah, at the front of the line, snapped back at him. "What is it, Benjinn?"

"My cloak got stuck! But it felt like someone stepped on it!"

"Probably your own foot, Benjin." Judah sounded irate.

"Or Judah's ladylove come to tell us to stop our snoring," one of the other brothers whispered. Someone

snorted, and the rest burst into laughter.

Elsabeth pressed her tongue to the inside of her cheek. She'd endured enough teasing from her fellow soldiers that the princes' jesting did not bother her. Yet as she listened to the rest of the princes laugh their way down the stairs, she wondered how such a man had been cursed with eleven rebellious brothers. She couldn't help but feel sorry for the pieces of the kingdom that would rest in their hands one day.

She did not expect what awaited them at the bottom of the stairwell. The darkness of the narrow steps ebbed into a silver-blue, and they stepped out into a forest. Elsabeth stopped, her jaw dropping. A slight, brisk breeze rippled through the trees, threatening to whip her blanket from her shoulders. She held it fast and reached out a hand, letting her fingers brush the cool, slick branches. They felt cold and heavy, as though a layer of ice had settled across them. The leaves were a deep silver shot through with blue. She wondered if she should dare to break a branch off, or if it would take too much effort and the noise would give her away.

As she pondered, laughter echoed from deeper into the forest. Benjin, closest to her, started running, and the others followed him.

They broke out of the woods onto a narrow stretch of land that met a lake. There, twelve boats waited, each with a grinning lady gripping the oars. "You're late," one of the girls said.

Benjin replied, "We have another lovely lady who simply cannot get enough of us. She won't leave us alone."

The girl rolled her eyes. "I find that rather hard to believe. If you weren't such a fine dancer, Benjin, you would have been cast aside long ago."

Elsabeth grimaced at the ease with which these young nobles disparaged each other. In the army, such talk was discouraged, anything that could affect the morale of the troop handled with care and consideration.

The princes jumped into the boats and they and their partners took turns manning the boat across the lake. Benjin and his partner lingered, whispering to one another on the shore, Benjin running his hands across her arms. Elisabeth made a face but took the chance to crawl into his boat, sitting on the middle plank. When they finally joined her, the woman took the front of the boat and Benjin the back.

“Have you put on muscle, Benjin?” the girl asked. “The boat seems heavier.”

“Maybe you’re just getting weaker,” Benjin said, and took up the oars himself.

The girl hissed some stinging reply and they descended into a squabble that Elisabeth easily shut out. She had no tolerance for stupid youths and their flirts fatale.

When they landed on the other side of the lake, Elisabeth waited until the princes and their partners had all disembarked their boats before getting out herself. She wobbled a moment, then straightened.

The princes had brought her to a castle, its grounds full of fountains that spit silver and bushes that grew feathers rather than flowers. She trailed the men and their partners into the castle, where they came to a dancing hall open to the stars. Torchlight and moonlight mingled, creating a glow of golden-silver that brushed everything in the room.

At the far end of the hall stood a raised dais, on which a troll sat. Elisabeth had seen trolls once or twice; they were always glad to host a party, and they were always very giving when it came to their magic and money. If you asked a troll in the proper manner, and with the utmost respect, you could easily be given entire kingdoms in exchange.

Elisabeth shuddered. They were also well-known to drink a lot of wine without ever getting drunk, but they could not drink water without being affected. She noticed twelve golden cups full of wine on a nearby table and wished for one, just one, small tankard of ale. She supposed that the trolls valued gold over silver, but Reurlise’s nobility thought of silver more highly, so it did not surprise her that Benjin made a face as he raised his cup and drank.

After the princes had drunk their fill, the troll spoke, his voice high and soaring. "Welcome, friends of Reurlise! I hope you will enjoy your revels." He gave a short shout, and music swathed through the air.

"You heard the man!" Benjin said.

So they danced, and as they did, Elisabeth found herself wondering why she didn't strip off her blanket and join in. The princes' partners were all fine dancers, but the princes put them to shame. And what was more surprising was how much they seemed to enjoy it. The tenseness eased from their shoulders; their bickering back and forth ceased until only the music could be heard.

Elisabeth wandered between the dancing couples, whirling to the rhythm. Her blanket flared out around her, and as she passed Judah and his partner, the blanket brushed against his leg. He startled and glanced over his shoulder. Elisabeth clutched her blanket closer and slid past him.

He returned his attention to his partner.

Elisabeth lingered close to them, unable and, she admitted, perhaps unwilling, to leave them alone together even though they were surrounded by other dancing pairs. Every now and then she gazed over at the troll king, but he did little other than dance, drink wine, and then sit in his throne and watch the humans. The men and their partners came and went from the hall to the gardens beyond, and the troll king did not stir to stop them.

Elisabeth had fallen asleep herself when the princes were at last ready to leave. They bid farewell to their partners and set off through the forest, their shoulders sagging. Elisabeth dragged herself along behind them, yawning into her hand. They crossed the lake, Elisabeth taking whichever boat she could climb into first.

On the other side, the princes walked on ahead of her, and their conversations drifted back to her.

"That was fun," one of the princes said. "The troll king's wine was delicious tonight."

"I love the fountains," another said. "They're so quiet."

"I would let a hundred women die to keep that place our secret," Benjin said, spitting the words out. None of his brothers answered him.

Elsabeth reached out, gripping one of the thick, heavy branches of the trees. With a quick, deft twist, she split the branch from the tree.

It sounded like someone had snapped their fingers, and Benjin twisted around, his eyes raking the forest. Though she was invisible, Elsabeth ducked behind a tree just in case.

“Did you hear that?” Benjin hissed.

The rest of the men stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Judah asked.

“I heard something!”

“It is only the wind,” Judah said from his place up front. “Stop acting as though everything is after us.”

Benjin scowled at his eldest brother. Elsabeth blessed Judah’s ignorance as she passed the men and went on ahead of them to the castle. She had just leaped back into bed and whipped the blanket off her shoulders to turn visible again when the princes arrived. One of them poked his head into her room, but this time she easily slipped into sleep.

When she wasn’t running around after the princes during the night, Elsabeth curated the gardens. The daffodils were beginning to burst into colour, offering a bright, cheery contrast to her thoughts. During her time in the army, Elsabeth had destressed by snatching any quiet time she could to sleep, her body too exhausted to partake in any physical exertions.

Now her mind was exhausted and her body yearning to be worked.

She ran her hands through the soil, enjoying the dark muddy clumps and the tangling of the roots around her fingers. The flowers were the national symbol of Reurlise, and she took the utmost care not to accidentally pull any out as she dug out the daffodil dragon-bugs that liked to burrow in the soil. While they didn’t harm the plants, they could be dangerous to people with their sting. She used thick gloves, rolling the bright, vibrant

bugs around in her palm. They looked like tiny, hissing jewels.

Something rustled behind her. She tensed as Judah settled down beside her on the grass.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. She dropped one of the daffodil dragon-bugs in the bucket beside her. It pinged against the bottom. Judah flinched at the noise.

He shifted, opening his mouth as though to speak. He shut it again, reached out to drag his fingers through the soil. Then he asked, “Why are you attempting this?”

“What, gardening?” She thought her work looked quite better than a mere “attempt.”

“No, trying to find out where we go,” he said.

“Why are you sneaking out?” she asked.

“Are you sure you don’t know?”

She reached over and plucked a daffodil. Had it been someone other than a member of the royal family, the act would have been a crime. But she handed the flower to the prince. “What would you do to me if I did?”

He took the flower, staring down at it. He rolled the stem between his thumb and forefinger, frowning. “I’m not sure.”

She smiled. “Aren’t you?”

He shook his head. “Why give a man a flower? You gave my brothers and I all daffodils yesterday, too.”

“You forget that I was a soldier during the war,” she answered. “And the offering of a daffodil from a soldier to another person is our salute.”

His eyes widened at her response. Then he tucked the flower inside the breast pocket of his tunic.

The next night, she once more emptied the wine into her refuse basin, but it was not Judah that looked in on her. Benjin came instead. She listened, her senses straining yet her breathing still deep and even. She heard the prince fiddling with something, then a slight hiss of his breath. He cursed. One of his hands grasped her ankle.

The muscles in her arms tensed but she kept herself still. One breath in, one breath out, she thought, reimagining herself in the battlefield, where pain could be a distraction that cost a life. When the needle punctured her foot, she did not flinch. The skin of her foot had built up strong callouses and was so thick that she was surprised the needle hadn't bounced off.

Apparently assured that she was indeed drugged, Benjin muttered to himself and rejoined his brothers. She got up, rubbed her foot, and followed him, invisible.

"She's out," Benjin announced.

The brothers clapped each other on their backs, all except Judah.

Benjin seemed to sense the reason for Judah's mood. "Brother, I understand your hesitation," he said. "But Mother can't find out, or we risk losing access to that beautiful place."

"But is our enjoyment worth another's life?" Judah asked.

Benjin shrugged. "The peace we fought for was worth our lives," he said. "So why shouldn't we demand the same?"

"I don't want her hurt," Judah said.

"It's not our fault that Mother takes things to extremes," Benjin said. "Maybe after Mother kills her, she'll realize her judgement isn't sound and think of another punishment for the next girl. Throwing her into the dungeon could be a viable solution."

"I should throw you into the dungeon," Judah growled.

"Oh stop it, Judah," another of the princes said. "She's just some soldier from who-knows-where. We paid our

dues when we led our country into battle. Now shouldn't we get to enjoy some sort of respite, enjoy what we fought for, without worrying?" His brothers murmured in agreement.

"I just don't want her hurt," Judah insisted. "I didn't expect Mother to actually..." His voice trailed off.

Benjin sighed. "If you're so worried about it, we can always just give her the troll-king's wine and enchant her. Then you could keep her in the troll-king's realm and just visit her whenever you like." He cast a sidelong glance at his brother. "And dance your little heart out."

Judah's answer was a stony silence.

Another brother spoke up. "Come, let's go," he said. "Don't bait him, Benjin. Not when he's going to be the next king and could make you miserable."

Benjin snorted and wrapped an arm around Judah's shoulder. "He can't make any of us miserable," he said. "It's his one failure as a brother."

"Aren't you the little comic," Judah said. He shook his brother's arm off and strode to the trapdoor. "Come on then," he said, and started hoisting it open. He stood by the doorway, waiting for each of his brothers to pass on through.

Then he stood, staring about the room with a frown. Elisabeth tiptoed her way toward him. She almost fancied he flinched as she passed by, but then he shook his head, hopped into the stairwell, and shut the door so fast she almost got knocked out by it. She flattened herself against the stairs, careful to stay to the side to avoid being stepped on.

"She can't be here," Judah muttered to himself. "And the question really is... do I want her to be?"

"What are you muttering to yourself up there, Judah?" Benjin called from below.

"Nothing much," Judah said.

And perhaps it was nothing. But Elisabeth could not contain her smile.

She abandoned Benjin's boat that night and scrambled into Judah's. Like Benjin's partner, Judah's lady had a sharp tongue that would have had her kicked out of the army with her first sentence.

"You're heavy tonight," the young woman said. "I hope your feet aren't as heavy as the rest of you."

"Such a wit," Judah said.

"You needn't be cross with me. It's not my fault you cannot enjoy the Troll King's hospitality. It was very generous of him to loan his court to you and your brothers for your revels."

"Almost as generous as him allowing you and your sisters to join us?" Judah asked, his tone mild.

The young woman shrugged one shoulder. "I know you are wary of interacting with the royalty of other kingdoms outside the officially sanctioned state halls, but you worry for naught. Do you think one of my sisters will start a war because Benjin refused to dance with her?"

"It's not that I think it will happen—I quite enjoy the revels with you and your friends... I just don't like to think of how the kingdoms would react, how they would judge and disparage you—"

The princess leaned forward, slapping her hand over Judah's mouth. "They aren't going to find out," she said. "Our time in the Troll King's realm is for ourselves, for our enjoyment, alone." She sat back, resting her hands in her lap. Her gaze fell on the daffodil poking out of Judah's breast pocket. "Oh, how pretty—" She reached out.

Judah's hand slapped against hers, pinning it to his chest. Her eyes widened.

"Aren't you supposed to ask first?" he said quietly.

The young woman stared at him. Then she ripped her hand away, the motion swaying the boat. Elisabeth sucked in a breath, pressing her hands against the side of the boat to steady her mind.

"What's so special about it?" she asked. "Your ladylove give it to you?"

Judah shook his head. “In my dreams,” he said. “The lady that gave me this would wish me executed first.”

“Poor thing. Don’t expect sympathy from me.”

“My mother—”

“I’ve heard all about your mother,” she said. “If these women agree to your mother’s terms, perhaps they deserve what they get.”

“Excuse me?”

The young woman shrugged. “Don’t hate me for it, Judah, but I wouldn’t throw my life away over you and your brothers. I wish every woman had my sense.”

“Well, aren’t you wise,” Judah said tartly. The rest of the boat ride was spent in silence, though the young woman knocked her shoes against the bottom of the boat in a strange rhythm. Her lips pursed and she whistled a low, slithering tune that made Elisabeth feel like her very body was made of the cold, glinting waters over which they rowed.

The forest was chill, and Elisabeth huddled deep into her blanket as she followed the princes back to the castle after the dancing. Her mind was fogged from both the lack of sleep and the hazy, suffocating atmosphere of magic. When she reached up without thought to take another branch, the echoing snap startled her so much she let slip a curse.

Benjin and Judah were nearest her, and they both whirled around at the noise. She froze, forgetting that she was invisible, clutching the branch between her fingers.

“What the—” Benjin started.

“It’s only the strong breeze,” Judah said. He shivered and rubbed his bare arms.

Elisabeth picked her way along the forest floor, darting ahead of the princes.

Elsabeth was almost asleep by the time Benjin came the final night. She dozed as he stuck the needle in her ankle, then yawned and rolled over, smacking her lips for show. Giddy, she even let out a tiny snore.

He snorted. "Not much of a lady, are you?" he muttered. "Stinking soldier."

She snored again and listened to the quiet thuds of his footfalls as he retreated. Enjoy yourself this night, she thought. You won't get to stick a needle in me again.

This time, she took one of the gold cups. Judah finished his wine last, setting the cup on the edge of one of the tables. As soon as he turned his back, she made sure no one else was looking and grabbed it. Spots of wine still shone at the bottom, as dark as blood. Her fingers tightened around its stem, and she stuffed the cup inside her sack.

The troll king was walking amongst the dancers, stealing in every now and then to twirl one of the princesses around.

She waited by the entrance for the princes to finish their revels. She hopped into the very first boat she came to, and was ecstatic when it left the shore before the others. This was the boat of one of the more muscular of the brothers, and he didn't seem to notice her added weight. He strained against the oars as though he enjoyed the exercise.

They were well ahead of the other men as he clambered from the boat to drag it through the shallow water. Elsabeth trailed his movements, stepping when he did, splashing when he did, until they stumbled onto the grass. While he waited for his brothers, she took off ahead, clutching the proofs of her claim to her chest.

She stuffed her sack under her bed next to her refuse basin and forced herself to close her eyes. The princes were more subdued as they came back, speaking in quiet voices and soon turning into bed. Before long she heard their snoring. She tossed and turned, giddy with excitement and victory. She may not have been able to help finish fighting the war, but she had found her own battle and triumphed.

Queen Nina called on Elisabeth the next day. The older woman's head was bowed as she entered the chamber where they were to meet. "What have you to tell me?" Queen Nina asked. The princes shuffled in behind her, Judah leading them. Benjin, smirking, came behind him. "Hopefully you have had some sense."

Elisabeth thought of Judah's dance partner, she with her self-professed "sense" and her insistence that she would never toss her life away. Elisabeth acknowledged that what she had done was risky, and that other women, perhaps far more accomplished than her, had tried and failed to do what she had. Therefore, it was without words that she drew out the items she had collected, the proofs she knew Queen Nina would need. Two silver branches and a gold cup—a cup that would mean nothing in this realm and would obviously have come from another.

Benjin let out a hiss. "You were drugged!"

"Never underestimate the ability of a soldier to smile through a blow," Elisabeth said.

The queen picked up the golden cup, her lips twisted as she looked it over. "Gold," she muttered. "Very overvalued." She tossed it over her shoulder. She snatched the silver branches Elisabeth held. She shook them, listening to the rattling twinkle of the leaves; she rubbed her fingers over them, frowning. "I've never seen such items before in my life."

"They come from a troll king's realm," Elisabeth murmured. "The trapdoor to which is in your sons' room." She led Queen Nina to the princes' chamber and, one by one, pushed aside all the beds. She grasped the handle of the trapdoor and, using all her strength and leverage, managed to lift it. The stairway gaped at them.

Queen Nina lifted her face, and her sons shrank away from her. She turned to Elisabeth. "My utmost thanks," she said, gripping Elisabeth's shoulders. "I offer you one of my sons as a husband."

Elisabeth flushed under the queen's praise and shook her head. "It would be difficult to choose between them, they are all so alike."

"Are we?" Judah blurted.

Elsabeth smiled. "Are you?"

Benjin was staring at her, his mouth gaping slightly. "You really risked the wrath of twelve brothers?"

"Eleven," Judah said, stepping up beside her. "Only eleven." He fingered the daffodil in his tunic pocket.

Queen Nina turned to Elsabeth. "Is this the son of mine you choose?"

Elsabeth plucked the daffodil from Judah and handed it to his mother. "Yes, your Majesty."

Queen Nina took the daffodil, sniffed it, and smiled softly.

Elsabeth and Judah were married within a fortnight. All contact with the troll king and the princesses had been cut off, and Queen Nina had yet to speak to any of her sons.

Elsabeth had asked her, and been granted, one night of dancing to celebrate their marriage. She wasn't sure if her brothers-in-law would appreciate the gesture, but Judah did. They danced themselves haggard and then retired.

"You probably hate dancing after all this," he said, tugging off his shoes and letting them fall to the floor. He kicked them under the bed. Then he pulled on a more comfortable-looking pair of boots and joined Elsabeth in the hallway.

"No, but I think I'm fine to avoid it for a while."

"And I'll avoid trolls." He shook his head. "I'm so glad you were able to discover our secret."

"Did... did you know it was me?" she asked.

"I suspected," he said after a moment. "It's why I blamed the wind." He reached out, tracing his fingers down her cheek. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "But even I know no wind can curse."

She smiled. "It cannot kiss, either."

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