



The East Wind

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Magic

The East Wind

“When the wind blows from the East and sets the icicles on the Great Tree to chiming – that is when you must never go out child. For the music that those icicles make, as they clatter and chink together, is the calling music of the Faeries and anyone who hears it, will be summoned by the King of the Faeries, to serve the Faery folk in the Elven wars.”

This is what the old man told his granddaughter, Meera, as she sat on his knee by the fire, one frigid winter’s night, and gazed up at him with eyes that shone like the firelight itself.

“Please Meera,” he said, “You might not be able to hear the music yourself, but please, you are never to go out when the wind blows from the East and you are especially not to go near the Great Tree at that time.”

The old man sighed and stroked her soft black hair with his rough hand, because he was never sure whether she understood what he was telling her. Meera was the only person in the village who did not have to bind her ears whenever the wind blew from the East. Meera could not hear her grandfather’s words, or the crackle of the fire, or the wind, howling in the chimney. She could not hear the clicking of her grandmother’s knitting needles, the gentle rocking of her chair against the stone flags of the cottage floor, back and forth, back and forth. She could not hear the sighs of her grandparents, because she had not been able to hear anything since her parents had disappeared that night, when she was a new baby.

But Meera could understand her grandfather. She watched his lips and she understood every word he said.

What she didn’t understand, because he never told her, was the fact that, the day her parents disappeared, he

and her grandmother between them, had poured melted wax into her ears until she screamed and sobbed and they themselves had tears streaming down their faces – and her ears were damaged beyond repair. What he wouldn't have needed to tell her, was that they had done this because they loved her so much they could not bear to lose her, as they had lost their seven children and their eight other grandchildren, to the calling of the Faeries.

And, because Meera loved her grandparents, every winter, when the wind blew from the East, she did what they asked and stayed inside. She watched, with eyes that burned with frustration, whilst her grandparents and everyone she knew, went about their daily chores, feeding the animals, collecting wood and water with the wind blowing snow and ice into their faces, tugging at their clothes and at the cloths they had wound round their ears. She watched when the sound of the wind grew so loud one day, that no binding could help those with young enough ears to hear; she watched whilst neighbours and friends staggered, one by one, from their houses, tearing at their ears, crying and pleading, but stumbling, even so, in the direction of the Great Tree and the Forbidding Mountains that reared behind them. She watched, as over the years, more and more of the villagers were summoned by the wind, until the only people who remained were her grandparents, who, themselves, had grown deaf with age. She watched as the winters grew longer, the ice deepening on the river, ancient trees cracking beneath the weight of the snow that iced their branches. When the wind wasn't blowing, she stood outside and watched, waiting for the birds to return in the Spring, but each year they were later and there were less of them. Each year they left earlier to make their journey before winter returned, until they stopped coming back altogether. She stood at the window and watched as thin, bedraggled remnants of the Faerie army came stumbling through the village, looking for a night's shelter in the broken, abandoned houses, or to draw water from the well on their way to other battles in other places. She took food to them, soup and bread, and she took hot embers from the fire to warm their feet and she gazed into each face, looking, always, for the parents whose faces she did not remember, for friends long gone. But she only ever saw faces that gazed from unseeing eyes, the faces of those whose souls are no longer their own.

And still, the winters grew harsher and Meera's grandparents withered like the hedgerows, into dry bent sticks, right before her eyes. Their own eyes faded, their faces grew lines of sadness as deep as the ridges on the bark of the Great Tree. With each winter, they bent a little more, faded a little more, until, on her seventeenth birthday, Meera found herself alone in the cottage with nothing but two new graves in the garden, and walls and floors and furniture that were imbued with too many memories. Alone, in a village empty even of ghosts

and she knew that she had lost everything that there was to lose.

So when the wind blew again from the East, she wrapped her grandmother's cloak around her shoulders, put on her grandfather's mittens, his hat on her head and she ventured out into the frosty air. She trudged through the the snow, though each step she took, was a drop into icy coldness and the wind shrieked and spat more ice in her face and tore at her clothes. She walked until her feet burned in agony and still she kept on, her head held high against any tears which might threaten to fall down her cheeks.

By the time Meera had arrived at the foot of the Great Tree, the wind had dropped and the shadows were long and blue on the smooth, glittering whiteness of the snow. Meera stood with her arms folded and gazed up at the icicles hanging from the branches, at the way they drew in the colours of the setting sun and threw them outwards again, purple and red and gold and orange and her eyes shone with bitter fury, bright as the shining of the icicles. "I'm here!" She called and she raised her fist and shook it. "I've come! Take me as well! I dare you to take me!"

Deep in the shadows of the black forest that grew beyond the Great Tree, a wolf stood and watched the girl and he was curious. He sat on the snow, and put the huge pads of his feet together and waited, to see what she would do. He had only ever seen humans who were under the spell of the summoning; humans who were scared, or despairing; humans who begged and grovelled and tore out their hearts and laid them before him. He was not used to seeing a human whose body was consumed with such rage and determination and he sat and watched whilst she screamed and cursed, her black hair glittering with ice crystals, her cheeks flushed blood red with cold and anger.

He watched, as she leapt high in the air and tore a handful of the icicles from the branches, scattering them, far and wide, over the snow. "Come and get me! Come and get me now, or am I not good enough for you?"

The sun was lowering on the horizon, stars were glittering to life in the soft, deep ocean of the sky. "Come and get me!" Meera screamed again and now, at last, there were tears, pouring from her eyes, freezing into rivulets on her cheeks.

The wolf stood and walked towards her and as he walked, a wind sprang up, a biting, nasty wind that blew flurries of snow over the frozen wastes, into Meera's eyes, into her mouth and ears. The wind stirred the remaining icicles and they clinked and chimed against one another, but Meera stood straight and stared at them, lit to silver now by the moonlight and she did not stir, did not fall to her knees, or turn, gibbering towards the hidden doorway in the Forbidding Mountains beyond.

So the wolf continued to walk and he appeared to grow, until he was as taller than any man and he came to stand, right in front of Meera and he looked down on her with eyes that were blue and cold.

“What do you want, child?” He asked.

Meera stood as tall as she could, though her head only came to the wolf’s shoulders. She could not see what the Wolf was saying, but she stood and stared right back at him to show that she was not scared. “I don’t know who you are,” she said, “But I want to go to see the King of the Ice Faeries. I will demand he stop these terrible wars and bring my people home.”

The wolf threw back his head and laughed and as he did so, his form dissolved into a great glittering snow drift, swirled and rose into the air, then settled into the figure of a pale man, for he was the King of the Faeries. “And what, my child, do you plan to give us in return?”

Meera lifted her chin so that she could continue to look straight into his beautiful, ice-blue eyes. “You have had your pay. My people have given years of their lives in servitude. That is enough, there is no payment owing.”

The King of the Faeries laughed again. “You are very innocent of the ways of the world, my child,” he said, but, even as he said it, his own heart was beating as though new-born, as he saw that he, too had been innocent. For many centuries, the King of the Faeries had thought that he had seen everything, knew everything, but now, as he looked at this girl, at the anger in her beautiful dark eyes, at her flushed cheeks and determined chin, he understood, for the first time, what it was that humans meant when they talked about love. He looked at Meera, at the shining of her eyes and realised that he would never again be happy until he could hold her as his own. But he knew that that happiness would not be complete unless she came to him of her own accord.

“Come then,” he said. “Come with me and I will introduce you to the King of the Faeries.”

And though Meera’s heart shivered inside her, she swallowed, lifted her chin and took his hand, allowing him to lead her through the hidden doorway, so that they passed through the heavy rock of the hillside. They passed beneath seams of quartz, through caves of crystal; they walked beneath waterfalls that cascaded from fern frothed tunnels, along paths so dark that Meera thought they must be walking through the essence of night and then through paths lit by the sunlight captured by icebergs in the Far North. And at last they came to the court of the King, deep within the mountain, where there were more trees and rivers and waterfalls, all of which grew from the ice itself. There was a palace with turrets and towers, all painted with the light of stars, and more icicles grew, like flowers, up the walls. And there were tall, pale people, dressed in clothes made of moonshine and the frail, frosty skeletons of winter leaves; and they came to line the streets and stare at this

strange human who entered their kingdom on the arm of their King. But the King himself shook his head and told them, in the language of the Faeries, that she was not to know who he was.

Then he took her to the most beautiful room in the palace, where the walls were carved from ice, that glowed in the colours of the world, and was carpeted in moss and winter roses. There was a bed made from softest swan's down and covered in silken sheets and he showed her all this and told her that it was all for her, for as long as she wanted. But Meera ran her eyes over it all and said to him: "But where is the King of the Faeries?"

He brought her food; the sweetest cheeses from all corners of the earth, peaches and pears and grapes, pomegranates and wine from the temples of the Gods, roasted meats of every kind, honey from the wild bees of the forest, ice in the flavours of every fruit. And she ran her eyes over it all and said to him: "But I need to talk to the King of the Faeries!"

He brought her clothes in the softest silks, in rainbow hues, in the glowing colours of spring, the fire colours of autumn and the pale coolness of winter, but Meera ran her eyes over them all and asked him again, her eyes shining with impatience: "Where is the King of the Faeries? I must speak with the King of the Faeries."

He brought musicians then and they played for her, harps and flutes and violins, because the King of the Faeries knew that music, above all other things, had the power to seduce. But of course Meera could not hear it and so she sighed and lifted her chin and demanded again: "Where is the King of the Faeries?"

And the King of the Faeries stood and looked at this girl who was more beautiful to him than anything he had seen in five thousand years and a crack split across his heart. He saw that her own heart was full only with love for her people.

"I am the King of the Faeries," he said and she drew back in astonishment, her eyes shining with betrayal and the crack in his heart widened and split apart so that he said: "If I re-call your people from the wars, if I end this war with the Elven Kings of Summer, will you come here, to live with me? Will you love me?" and she looked at his handsome face, his sincere eyes and she nodded. "Yes, if you do all those things – if you keep your word, then, if you call me, I will come."

And so he recalled her people. He went down to the chamber that was the very heart of the mountain and he raised the ice knife that stood there, slashing it across his wrist till blood ran deep and true and Meera found herself standing once again, in the centre of the tired, dead village whilst all around her, people she no longer knew, stumbled into the village, dragging their feet, exhausted and dazed, disbelieving of their luck, people who did not know how to live any longer. People whose hands shook too much cook to their own food, people

who no longer remembered how to plough a field, or how to plant seeds.

But among the people were Meera's parents, who took one look at her and knew her and cried to see her still alive and took her in their arms and loved her.

And so Meera showed everyone in the village how to live again, how to cook and plant and plough and hunt. And now that the Elven Kings were no longer at war, the snows soon melted so that flowers pushed their way out of the earth, opening their petals to the sun and filling the air with their sweet perfume. Flocks of birds came winging overhead, the creatures came crawling from burrows and dens to sniff the air, whilst butterflies and bees and everything that crawled or hopped soon filled the woods and fields and at last the people were able to laugh and dance and love again.

Winter still came every year, for the animals and the plants needed their rest and, at first, when the wind blew from the East, the people bound their ears, but they soon found that they did not need to. The icicles still rang with their chimes, but they no longer summoned the souls of the villagers. They rang a different, sweeter tune, instead, one that grew sadder and more wistful with each passing year, so that the villagers often stopped what they were doing to listen. But then they shook their heads and continued with their work, for they felt no sympathy for one who had enslaved their souls.

Sometimes, Meera thought of the King of the Faeries and wondered about him, but she was busy with her new life, helping the other villagers, teaching her new sisters and brothers and their children, and then their children, about life and about the grandparents that none of them had known. Sometimes, she looked towards the Great Tree and the Forbidding Mountains but she did not return. Why should she?

And so the years passed and one day Meera found herself an old, old woman, and when she woke up one day she knew it would be her last day on earth.

So she put on her cloak and her hat and her mittens and set off for a walk. Her great nieces and nephews asked to go with her, but she shook her head, taking their hands in hers and kissing their cheeks. "Not this time, sweet hearts," she said, "not this time." And she walked, through the snow, all the way to the Great Tree. The wind had dropped by the time she got there and shadows grew long and blue over the smooth glittering of snow, though the icicles gleamed pink and orange and gold in the light of the setting sun. And there was an enormous wolf, waiting for her.

She stood and she looked at the wolf and he sat and gazed back at her with eyes that were old with the pain of love.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for returning my life and the lives of my people.”

The wolf dissolved into a great glittering snow drift which swirled and rose into the air, then settled into the figure of a pale man, whose skin was no older than it had been the first time he saw Meera. “Why did you not come before?” he said and the crumbled pieces of his heart throbbed with sorrow in his great chest. “You said you would come if I called and I have called you, so many times. I have called and wept and pleaded with you to come.”

And Meera looked at him, as she lay down, there in the snow. “I did not hear you,” she said and her eyes shone, one last time, with the light of the moon, before she closed them, forever.

The End

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