



The Man in the Tower

Thalia Bell
Retold Fairy Tales

Malia smiled as she made her way up to his room. She remembered the first time he had come to her little cottage outside the forest, dressed as a common man. She remembered how he had watched her collect buttercups from her little garden, which she then sold in the market. She remembered how he had stolen one of them from her basket when she hadn't been looking, and snuck it into her hair. She remembered how he had come every day after that, wooed her with poems and sonnets, love notes and songs, swept her away with a whirlwind of love. She remembered when he had told her that he was the prince of Gatlon, how surprised and delighted she had been. She remembered how he had proposed to her in secret. Any day now, they were to be wed.

As she walked happily up the stairs, she was practically giddy, expecting her Prince "Charming" James to surprise her with an impromptu wedding ceremony. She finally reached his room. She opened the door without knocking. Her joyful face fell when she saw him sitting on his bed, with a solemn expression on his face.

"Darling, what's wrong?"

"We need to talk, Malia," he sighed.

She sat on the bed beside him and put her hand over his. He stiffened at her touch, and didn't reach for her hand. At that, she knew something was wrong, and she could guess what it was.

Her voice dropped an octave, suddenly becoming hard, cold. “No. Don’t tell me that’s what’s happening right now.” She took her hand back from his. Can’t you stand up to him?” she yelled. She took a moment, trying to steady her breathing, quell her growing nausea.

“He’s the King! I won’t inherit Gatlon unless I do what he says. I thought he would let me marry you. I didn’t mean to hurt you, Buttercup.”

She gave a little sob at the name. For a long time, she just sat there, until she remembered.

“What about the baby?” she asked softly, putting her hand on the little curve of her belly.

“I’ll have to marry the King of Darrow’s daughter. She can never know about the baby. You have to take him and raise him at your cottage. We can never hear from you.” he said. It was taking him everything he had not to let the tears spill down his cheeks.

“And you won’t,” she said, her voice like an icy wind.

“Buttercup, I’m sorry,” he said, moving towards her. She pushed him away. He sat back down, holding his face in his hands, not letting her see him cry. She waited until the door was safely shut, before she collapsed against it and broke down.

She was gone before sunrise the next morning.

She stared at her son’s beautiful face. No matter how much she hated James, she couldn’t help but love her son. He was the spitting image of his father. She put him down, watching as he slept. She thought about how different everything could have been if she was Queen. Her son would have been King. She and James would have raised him together. But he had left her. For Eva.

The name itself made acid lurch in her throat. He had given up their family to be part of hers. Her son had been born too. Their children had been born only three months apart.

She hadn’t fought for her son, she thought, not hard enough. She had let James put not only her, but their son aside.

He would have been King, she thought, the words repeating in her mind, over and over again. He would be King.

It had almost been too easy to bypass the palace guards. The poor lads were so starved that they were willing to trust a beautiful lady in the middle of the night with a few drinks in her hand. She crept into the palace, holding her basket like she would have held the baby inside. As if sensing the urgency of the situation, her son slept peacefully, not making a sound. She climbed and walked and climbed until she reached the nursery, the one her son would have had. The thought made her blood boil. She went inside. She tiptoed to the cradle.

Raising the basket to her face, she took her son in her arms and kissed him on the forehead. You will be King, she murmured to his sleepy, startling blue eyes. She looked at the two boys. They looked exactly the same, just like their father. Anyone would have thought they came from the same mother.

She picked up the other boy and placed him in her basket, ignoring her feelings towards him. She looked at her son one last time, and left the room, disappearing into the night.

18 years later:

-Sophie-

I feel the air whizzing through my hair, the adrenaline pumping through my veins as my horse, Crash, races through the forest. I like to go riding like this, it gives me a sense of control. It's so hard to find that in my line of work. My people need me as the heir to the throne of Blancforte, but I need to be free. When we eventually rest, I let Crash wander off, while I walk aimlessly through the forest, deep in thought. That's when I hear it. Beautiful, soulful music. I follow the whispers of the cello, calling me deeper and deeper into the woods. I walk, as if in a trance, until I reach a clearing in the forest. That's when I come to my senses, and see it. A tower in the midst of the clearing, taller than our castles and far more magnificent. It does not seem to have any doors or openings, save for a large window at the top, from where I can see a man, about my age, playing the cello, staring into the beautiful open sky.

"That's beautiful!" I call up, hoping he will hear me.

He does. I know this because he drops his instrument and screams out loud. He hoists himself up to the ledges of the window and cranes his neck to see me, staring at me like I'm a mythical creature. I instantly want to take back the words and restore peace to the forest.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" he asks frightfully.

"Hi, there," I say lamely. "I'm Princess Sophie. I heard you playing the cello..."

"What?" he yells loudly.

I realise I've been murmuring to myself. I have an idea. I reach for the parchment paper I keep in the folds of my cloak, the bow on my back and one of the arrows from my quiver. ✕

:I'm Sophie, I heard you playing the cello and followed the music here. It's beautiful. What's your name? I write on the piece of paper, and wrap it around the arrow tightly.

I send the arrow flying towards the window, and it lands just to his left, splintering the window frame. He looks at me, impressed. Bullseye, I think smugly.

He reads the note, and then withdraws into his room. I think I've scared him off, until I see that he has returned with his own bow and arrow, and sends an arrow to my side.

✕

:Thanks. I've had a long, long time to practice. I'm Edward.

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:Why are you up there? Do you need help getting down?

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:No, Mother says I can't leave.

×

:There's someone up there with you?

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:No, it's just me most of the time up here. But mother visits me sometimes. She says I can't leave; that if I do, she won't be safe. I love her. I would never put her in danger.

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:Oh... how long have you been up there?

×

:Eighteen years...

My jaw drops at this. I thought I had been trapped in my situation. I never had the choice of what to be, I had been born to be Queen, marry some powerful prince whom I didn't love and have powerful children; it was my destiny. But it sounded a lot better than being stuck in a tower for eighteen years.

My next reply took forever to craft, as I thought of what to say next. :Have any friends?

×

:Not really. You interested?

I grin. This should be fun.

I visit him everyday. I can't help it. He's so wonderfully interesting. He has read so much and knows so much more than I do. He's lovely to talk to. Sometimes, I go twice a day, but he never seems to get bored of me. He waits for me, with his bow and arrows ready. And everyday, we talk until we use all the arrows we have. Slowly, we learn everything about each other, like I know how he makes his own arrows. He knows I love swimming in the river at midnight. I know about his imaginary friend named Pisces. He knows about how I lost my parents when I was a child, and how my brothers and I look after each other. He tells me about his mother. She's a mystery to both of us. But she is very powerful. She's a sorceress, and has learned to control all the elements of

nature. He tells me about how she visits him, blowing in through the window of the tower like a gust of wind. He tells me how he wishes she would spend more time with him, how he feels she doesn't love him.

He doesn't know I'm falling in love with him. I feel it, every time I visit him, the feeling gets a little stronger, and I only wish I could get closer to him.

It has been four months since we've started talking. I want to tell him. Telling someone you love them is never a mistake, and whether he feels the same way or not, I know I have to be true to myself. Also, tomorrow's Ed's birthday. I know his mother will be coming back. I'm going to ask him if I can meet her. I'm not sure if he will be okay with it or not. I receive my answer when he tells me:

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:NO!! NO!! Absolutely not! You can't be here tomorrow, Soph, she can't ever know we've been speaking!

:×Why not?×

:I don't know why, but she says I can't ever tell anyone I'm up here! Please, you just can't!

I start to get worked up at this.

:×I don't know what else to do, Ed. I want to meet her. I want to meet you! I want to be with you, to hear your voice, to really see you.....

The next note I send, I send with all the passion of my heart:×

:I love you, Edward. You are the first thought that enters my mind at dawn, and you linger in my thoughts at night, filling my dreams. I dream of meeting you, of loving you. You make me happy. I don't know how you feel but I know there is something here. Do you feel it too?

I see his careful fingers unfurl the note, and read the words. He takes his time, leaving me in tatters below. And then he looks down at me. Before I can attempt to interpret his expression, or before he can send a reply, we hear the rustling of leaves and trees. No one has ever come here but me in the last four months. What crosses his face now, is unmistakable panic. Run. I run. I run to the edge of the enormous clearing, and hide among the trees and undergrowth. I pray that nothing goes wrong.

~ Edward~

Words could not describe what went through my mind when I read that note. I didn't know what to say, but whatever she said she felt, I knew in my heart I felt it too. I loved pouring my heart out to her. She always knew just what to say, how to cheer me up. She was curious, funny, intelligent. Her company was the only thing I looked forward to, sometimes it felt like she was the only thing keeping me alive. But what did I know about love? Only what I knew from other people's experiences, recorded in books and stories, as a magical, all-pervading feeling. Was this love?

That's when I hear something approaching the tower. A powerful wind rustles through the trees, when my stomach drops. I have trained myself to listen for the signs that mother is coming, and she is coming. She often drops into the tower without warning, usually harnessing the gentle winds to lift her into the tower. Today, she seems to have brought a twister with her.

As the whirlwind draws nearer, my thoughts instantly go to Sophie. I look down at her, urgency in my expression. Run and hide! I tell her with my eyes. She can't see them, but the next time I look for her, she is gone. I sigh with relief. I go about sweeping the notes out of sight, and into a little box. Just as I finish, I hear her tornado sweeping through the clearing. With a dramatic breeze, she enters through my window and materialises before me. Her wind blows my room into disarray as it always does. She never did tell me how she got her powers. I make a mental note to ask her about them later.

“Darling! It's been so long!”

I hug her, and feel a rush of love surging through me. “Mother! You're finally here.”

“You couldn't possibly think I would miss your 18th birthday, did you?”

She finally looks beyond my shoulder, and sees the mess she's made in my room. She laughs.

“Oh dear, I've done it again, haven't I? What is all this paper? It's made such a mess....”

My stomach drops. I look back. The box has tipped over, the notes, hundreds and hundreds of notes are scattered across the floor.

“Oh those, just a game I’m playing. Mother, let’s talk about your last trip!” I try, but she has already begun to read them.

She reads one by one, her face twisting in anger and disbelief, until she starts ripping them to shreds. I’ve never seen her like this. I begin to back away, until I realise I have nowhere to go.

“Who have you been talking to?” she screams. “Edward, who have you been talking to?”

“Just some girl!” I cry out.

She shrieks out loud, then mumbles something about finding out who I am, which I do not understand. All I need to do is calm her down. But when she meets my eyes, she is anything but calm. The fire in her eyes surprises me. “Why did you have to go and do this?” she screams. “I never wanted to hurt you, Ed! I gave up so much for my son, but if anyone finds out who you are, they’ll take everything away from him. I can’t let that happen!” Then something changes in her tone. “How dare you disobey me?” I have no idea what she is talking about. Wasn’t I her son? In her anger, she sends a blast of wind at my chest, and another and another. With each one, I become less steady on my feet, my confusion growing. The last one knocks me off my feet completely and before I realise what’s happening, I topple out of the open window.

I fall, the wind whooshing in my ears, the most terrifying feeling in my stomach. But for the first time, I feel free, unburdened. The last thought that goes through my mind is Sophie. I’ll miss her. I close my eyes. I hit the ground, and immediately feel myself crack. The pain makes me cry and scream. I blink my eyes, but see only darkness. I’ve lost my sight, I realise. But I’m alive. I need help. Sophie will help me. Where is she? Did she leave? She left, I realise. Before I have a chance to dwell on it, my mother comes down to watch me, holding the last note Sophie wrote me.

“So, she loves you, does she?” my mother says. “Well, soon there will be nothing left of you to love,” she spits at me.

“Mother...” I manage to get out, as I roll onto my bloody side. I immediately cry out and lay back. Tears stream down my face as my eyes register nothing but darkness, and I know nothing but pain.

“I’m not your mother,” she says in disgust, and turns away from me. “I tried to love you, but it was too hard.

But I never hurt you.” She hesitates for a moment, before then her voice hardens. “I don’t want to do this, but I have to.” My heart breaks when I hear her pull her dagger out of her boot.

~Sophie~

I sit quietly in the bushes, playing with the leaves around me, shredding them to bits with my nervous fingers. I wonder what they are talking about, what it would be like if I was up there with them. The night air is cool now, and for the first time I notice how dark it is. I feel like I should go. I go over to where I left Crash, a little away from the tower where he likes to graze in the open meadow. I find him soon enough. I wander towards my horse slowly, tired and a little wistful, wondering whether Edward was thinking about me too. I’ll just go in the morning, I think to myself, and if he doesn’t feel the same way... we’ll find a way to recover. It’s all going to be alright, I think, as I jump into the saddle. And that’s when I hear a frightened, long scream. My instincts don’t kick in until I hear a huge thud coming from the tower. I spur Crash forward, until we reach the clearing once more, and my face instantly pales as I take in the scene unfolding at the foot of the tower. It’s Edward, on the ground covered in blood, and an older woman standing over him, the dagger in her hand rendering me blind and useless for a split second, reflecting the faint moonlight from above into my eyes. Still seated atop my horse, I don’t even have time to get down from my horse as I draw my bow and aim an arrow straight at her. She doesn’t even see my face before she falls to the ground with one last cry of shock and pure agony. I don’t even bother to spare her a glance as I leap out of the saddle and bolt to Edward’s side.

I place my hand on his bruised cheek, and then over his heart, feeling his pulse get fainter and fainter. This is the first time I’m really seeing him. I will never see him alive, I realise. I start to panic, wondering what I can do. True love’s kiss can cure anything, I remember.

I lean down, and kiss him. I kiss him like he means the world to me, with all the hope and love I can muster. I kiss him with everything I have. But nothing happens. I don’t know what to do next, I realise with helpless pain. There’s nothing I can do. I close my eyes, praying for a miracle. A single teardrop falls from my eyes, and into his. I just hold him, wishing he would come back. Just then, I feel a little something flutter against his heart. It’s so faint that I think I imagine it.

“Sophie? Is that you?”

I open my eyes, and see him staring up at me, taking me in for the first time. “Hey, I can see again!” he exclaims. I’m so happy that the strangeness of the statement barely registers in my mind. I almost laugh with relief. “Yeah, Ed. It’s me. You’re alive!”

“Thank you for saving me,” he said, taking my hand, and squeezing it. He suddenly looks like he’s remembering something, and his eyes turn dark. “My mother? Did you...?”

In response, I just look at him sympathetically. He nods stoically.

“Hey, it’s just me,” I said, rubbing his shoulder. He closes his eyes, and a tear trickles down his cheek. We just lie there for what seems like forever.

1 year later:

He stands at the altar, waiting for me. I take my time down the aisle, as I think of all the things in my life that have changed since I met Ed. I’m so wonderfully happy all the time, and his voice is the calming presence in my crazy world. He took it quite normally when I told him I was the princess, and supported me through the whole process of gaining control over my kingdom. And the people of Blancforte love him. He has done so much for them since he has got here, I know that he is the best King I could possibly give them.

And I have parents now! When we went back to tear down the tower, we found a chest full of journals hidden at its foot. They explained everything about who he was, and we went to see his real parents, King James and Queen Eva in Gatlon, and his half-brother Oscar. And although Ed is the real heir to the throne, they both agreed that Oscar should rule the Kingdom. He was a kind, intelligent man. Ed said he reminded him so much of his mother.

I finally reach the dais, and give myself away freely. I’ve never been more sure of anything, I decide, as I stare into his loving eyes. I’ve found my prince. I’ve found my fairytale.

THE END

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