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Abstract

Malkin's riders were venturing farther and farther across the border—nearly, the scouts reported, to the River Sils, which was the easternmost edge of the dominion of Welborne. The King of Welborne spent much time in council, listening to the varied advice of the elders.

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The Stable Keeper's Son: A Fairy Tale

By Wesley Young

Malkin's riders were venturing farther and farther across the border—nearly, the scouts reported, to the River Sils, which was the easternmost edge of the dominion of Welborne. The King of Welborne spent much time in council, listening to the varied advice of the elders. “Strong magic. You must appeal to strong magic,” said one. “Strong weapons, larger armies, that’s the way,” said another. “The only help for us against Malkin,” said a third, the oldest of them all, “is the Deep Magic, greater than which no man knows. The Sprites can show the way.”

For Filgrie, the stable boy, these councils in the castle meant less work in the stables. Over the last ten days, King Nobley had ridden only once. And so it was that one early morning, Filgrie's dad saddled a tall, white mare, then said to his son, “She needs to be ridden. Take her out a while, no galloping, and do not go near the river.”

“Yes, Father,” Filgrie said. He mounted and was off with a wide smile. He led the beautiful animal along Market Lane, to avoid the river, until he reached Grinson's Meadow, and there he turned toward the hills where the townspeople pastured their sheep. Just as he crossed the stone bridge at the end of town, out of the ground rose a Sprite. Filgrie pulled the reins and halted. The creature breached the earth, rippling the dirt away like a wave of water. She—for it seemed clearly female—stood full height on the now solid ground, the grass beneath her feet showing no sign of having been disturbed. With a voice like rain on a soldier's shield, she sang.

*Fortune rise and fortune fall,
Why is fortune here to call?
You'll ride and reel past briar and brook,
But we'll do something to your look.*

The creature was twice as tall as Filgrie, and had white hair and a white robe with shoes of white glass. Her garments moved like water. Welborne legends often included these beings, which is how Filgrie recognized it right away, though in the stories the Sprites were thought to be much smaller. The tales were accurate, however, about their use of rhymes and riddles, and every citizen of Welborne knew to take these seriously.

Something in her eyes frightened Filgrie, and he kept trying to look away, but found he couldn't manage for more than a few moments. Turn his gaze where he might, within a breath or two he snapped back to stare into the deep, pupil-less eyes. He waited for the second riddle—Sprite's always sing twice a day, lightning and thunder—but nothing came.

Then the creature looked down at the ground just in front of Filgrie's horse. She clapped her hands together. The ground, again behaving like water, rolled in a cresting wave that washed the horse high up, then tossed it back. Filgrie was on the ground in a moment, striking hard on his back, trying in a tangle to get to his feet. The horse had fallen too, and would have crushed Filgrie except that it landed a little to his left.

The boy was just steadying himself on his knees when the second wave hit, soil and sod like a wave on the seashore, this time breaking right on him. He closed his eyes and tumbled backward

in the wash. When he opened them again, all was level grass and empty pasture. The king's horse was getting up. The Sprite was gone.

Filgrie's face was covered with grainy mud that bothered his eyes. He rubbed them, which only let more mud in and made things worse. It was hard to see. He staggered to his horse and mounted, ungracefully. Just as he situated himself in the saddle, the mare took off at a blistering gallop. Never had any of the horses under his father's care done anything besides obey, but now this animal was fully wild.

Filgrie talked to it, called to it, pulled on the reins, yelled for help, all to no effect. His eyes were watering and stinging, and he could hardly see at all. He considered jumping off, but could not bring himself to do it, so instead he leaned far forward and held on with all his strength.

Far away, on the other side of the River Sils, Lithe said goodbye to the chickens and decided to take the Sils Trail home so she could have a look at the river. She longed for a quiet moment to sit by the old waterwheel. With her basketful of eggs held in one arm, and a white flower in the other, she walked toward the lowering sun.

Her parents would rather her come straight home from the chicken roost. As frontier farmers homesteading in the woods between Welborne and Malkin, the family was brave by necessity, but also cautious. The chicken chore was the farthest Dad allowed Lithe to venture unaccompanied. She liked the distance. Her love for her family was complemented by her love for solitude in the deep woods, and it was a thirst for this solitude that led her now to her favorite spot in all the world.

When Lithe was five years old, and their family only one year on the farm, her father took her and her baby brother to the River Sils to show them the ruins of the dwarf's waterwheel, used in the last century for everything from grinding grain to polishing gold for Welborne's castle. She loved the place immediately. They sat on the banks in silence as the sun sank in the west and the magic of twilight rose from the earth. It was that day that they saw the Fairy Fleet—the three dozen tiny vessels, some with sails and some with paddles, manned by the tiniest, playfulest, most beautiful glowing creatures Lithe ever imagined. Despite her returning to the same spot as often as she might, she never captured a second glimpse of that spectacle. But the way her heart felt that first day, the memory of that memory, drove her back and back again, washed to the banks by the ever-welling hope inside her. She was too young to know that the Fairy Fleet is never found when it is looked for.

Not far from twilight, she reached the spot. She hung her egg basket on a low limb, stuck the flower in her hair, and sat down on the grassy bank. Across the river the fireflies sparked from within the darkness of the wood. There was deep forest in all directions. The dwarf's wheel sat unmoving, and she watched the water trickling over the cups, tinkling into the river like diamond drops in a sea of glass. She could see fish in the clear, flowing stream below, chasing one another in their evening games.

Then she heard the hoofs, thundering across the river, sending up swarms of glowing fireflies. The rider came into view as the horse dashed wildly through the trees. It ran upriver until out of Lithe's sight, then the thundering grew louder as it doubled back and bolted along the bank. The rider was leaning forward and shouting at the animal. The river was not at all wide, and she could hear him clearly. He was only a boy. She sat as frozen as the waterwheel.

Suddenly the creature dug in its hoofs and tossed the rider over its head and into the river, about midway across. Lithe sprang to her feet and ran down the hill to the water's edge. Kicking off her shoes, she rushed into the water.

The boy came up, splashing and spluttering.

“Here!” she called, wading farther out to about waist deep. “Here, swim toward me. There you go. It’s alright.”

He paddled toward her, saying nothing. When he was near enough, she reached out and took one of his hands and held it tightly in hers. His face was covered in dark mud, almost black, and she thought it strange that his plunge into the water had not washed any off. She considered that it might be some sort of mask the boy was wearing, but if so, it was an odd mask, a liquid one, slipping and dripping down his face. He gained his footing and stood up in the shallow water. Then he pulled his hand from hers and plunged his head into the river, rubbing his face below the water, both hands working rapidly. He rose, and she saw that half the mud was gone. Down he went again, and again wiped and scrubbed. When he surfaced this time, Lithe saw his fully revealed features.

A tight, clipped gasp escaped from her throat. Her chest tightened, and, hardly knowing what to do, she dropped into the water, falling onto both knees, her head the only thing above the surface. She bowed as low as she could without submerging. The flower fell from her hair and floated downstream.

“I am sorry, I didn’t know, I am—”

“What are you doing?” the boy asked.

“I’m sorry, I’ve never, and I didn’t know, you see, because your face was covered.”

“Didn’t know what? Stand up, let’s get out of the river. Why are you down there?”

Before she could answer a new noise came from the woods behind them, faintly rising from the now darkened forest on the girl’s side of the river. Hoofbeats. These grew rapidly louder, and Lithe could tell they were from many horses. She stood, fearing these might be the Malkinians. The evening was darkening to night. She scanned the bank for a place to hide.

“They’re coming on quick. Let’s get to that millhouse,” the boy said.

“Yes,” she answered, still awestruck. Lithe had recognized his face immediately. This rider who had been tossed into the river was the Prince of Welborne, the only son of the king. Lithe had seen the royal family twice in her life, the most recent at last year’s Festival, where she had watched this prince parade by in the great procession. She never doubted that the boy now with her in the river was this same royal personage.

The pair ran the sludging and awkward trudge enforced by knee deep water. The fireflies from within the wood were ablaze and swarming, yellow lights darting here and there among the shadowed trees.

“Hurry,” the supposed prince shot out in a half whisper. “They’re close.”

Now splashing along in ankle deep water, now on the grass of the bank, they sprinted toward the shelter of the mill. Twenty paces to go. Their own footfalls blended with the thunder of the hoofs that grew ever louder. Ten paces. Lithe was panting. Almost there.

Then from the blackness among the trees an even darker blackness erupted. A dozen riders on charcoal horses wearing the black and red robes of Malkin shot out of the forest and cut off the children’s flight, stopping in front of the waterwheel.

The princely boy reached out and took Lithe’s arm in a firm grasp. “It’s alright,” he said. “We’ll be alright. Just follow me,” and he began walking backward slowly, keeping his eyes forward on the riders.

“Yes, sire,” Lithe said, comforted by his royal courage.

“Why do you call me—”

“Halt!” a terrible voice roared from behind them. They both snapped around to find their retreat cut off. Five Malkinian soldiers, on foot, had silently crept in and made an impassable wall.

The riders by the mill drew nearer, tightening the distance. One open lane remained, straight away toward the trees. Lithe’s knees tensed for a last desperate bolt, but before she could make the dash, more riders materialized out of the tree line, and the entrapment was complete.

“Take him,” said one dark rider, a voice like a war drum.

Two of the dismounted soldiers came up behind Filgrie and took his arms.

“The Prince of Welborne,” continued the black rider. “This is a fortunate turn, indeed. And all unguarded in the forest.”

“Oh, you forget,” another shadow jeered, “he’s got his bodyguard there.”

This taunt drew uproarious laughter from the Malkinians. Lithe’s knees nearly gave way, and only by a great effort did she keep from collapsing to the ground. She looked to the prince who was looking right back at her with desperate eyes. The look reminded her, somehow, of her younger brother. This sparked an idea.

“Wait!” she called out, pitifully. “Wait, you’ve made a mistake.” A tear swelled to breaking and trickled down her nose. She choked a moment, then continued with her speech, which she thought was a complete lie. “This is not the prince. This is my brother. Folks say they look alike. We are frontier farmers. He was helping me with the chickens. The eggs are just there, over there, on the bank,” and she pointed to where she had left the basket. Her knees were betraying her again, and she could say no more. When she looked at the prince, she found his eyes looking less afraid and more confused.

“Silence!” the rider roared. “You will not talk your way out of this, dear one. We’ve as big of plans for you as for him, perhaps even more sporting.”

At these words Lithe could stand no longer, and she fell to the grassy ground in a heap, which elicited another wild laugh from the onlooking soldiers.

Filgrie stood bewildered by the scene, but his mind was beginning to piece together the girl’s words, and the Malkinians’, and also the cryptic chant of the Sprite. He couldn’t know for sure, not without some way to see his reflection, but he had enough of a hunch to try something desperate.

“She lies!” he lied. “Hear the prince’s words. She is no sister of mine. I have never seen her before, and I will let no subject of mine die on my lands. Let her go, and I will leave with you peacefully. You have captured the Prince of Welborne, be content with that.”

For a frozen moment, nothing happened.

“What is more,” Filgrie went on, “I will write letters to my father, the king, saying that I have deserted Welborne of my own accord. Your taking me by force will cause war, but by my word it can be prevented. Only let this girl go!”

The leader sputtered out a short laugh, but then fell into silence. The other Malkinians stared at him. After some time, he spoke. “Let’s go. We have what we want.”

“But—” one of Filgrie’s captors began to complain.

“I said let’s go! Leave the girl.”

Two soldiers snatched the princely stable boy to a horse and tossed him, chest downward, in front of the saddle. Lithe, still in a heap on the turf, could only watch as the army trotted off into the forest. Filgrie looked back at her, gave a strange smile, and then disappeared into the night.

The girl felt she would never move again. The evening’s shift from eggs and Fairy Fleets to wild horses and wicked riders was overwhelming. Her spirit reeled. She collapsed farther, lying now on her side, and closed her eyes against the world.

She assumed she awoke in a dream. The ground was moving. Not shaking like an earthquake, but rolling like the ripples of a lake. She sat up, wide eyed. An enormous figure stood before her, something like a huge woman, glowing in the night with a pale lunar luminescence. The waterwheel, which had been frozen her whole life, was spinning rapidly. She wondered how that could be, and as she looked up at the looming, glowing figure, she wondered what sort of danger she was in now, and she began to cry.

“Where did they take him?” the creature asked in a voice like running water.

“The prince?”

“The boy. Where did they take him?”

“To Malkin, I suppose,” Lithe sobbed.

“No, I mean where was he standing when they took him? Where was he when he saved you?”

“There,” she said, pointing, “right there next to where you’re standing.”

The Sprite looked down. The ground was still wavering like the surface of a windblown lake. Rather than stoop, the creature remained standing and sank into the earth until her arms were able to reach the grass. With one motion she yanked a handful of turf and held it tightly in her hand. Then she slowly began to sink even farther down, chanting as she went.

*Deep devotion, ancient wine,
Is there Magic Deep as thine?
None can match, oh wondrous thought,
Salvation sacrifice has bought.*

A Poem by Katherine Dubke

Yet to be Revealed

After J. R. R. Tolkien

Rest beside this mound of stones
As sun descends from clouded throne.
See his silken threads of gold,
Diffuse the light he ever holds;
Royal robes worn by his grace
Adorned by train of rose and lace.
Sky attends the sun’s advance
Until he sets from the expanse.
Speak, while clouds are grey and still
and as we linger on this hill.
What is it from life you seek?
The glory of the sun is weak
Compared to what I see in you:

A fire of prismatic hue

Smolders in your steady eyes;
Unlike the sun, it never dies.

Reveal to me your solemn vows.
The stones and I bear witness now.