

The King and the Willow Tree

At King Max's twenty-first birthday party, Max wandered around shaking hands with everyone – very polite, very charming, very bored. Whenever anyone said, 'We're all looking forward to the coronation next month, Your Majesty,' Max smiled politely, but the smile didn't reach his blue eyes. When duchesses and countesses presented their daughters to him, hinting that a king needed to be married, he bowed nicely and turned away.

The courtiers were worried. Soon Max would be crowned King. His father, the Prince Regent, who had looked after the queendom so well since Max's mother had died, would retire. And that was very worrying, because Max didn't seem at all interested in being King.

The only person he wanted to talk to was a count who had just come back from a trip around the world, but the Prince Regent didn't like the look of that and soon interrupted.

'Time for a speech, my boy,' he said to Max. 'Do the proper thing. Be polite.'

So Max made a polite, proper, entirely lifeless speech that thanked everyone for coming, then went back to the well-travelled count, who had climbed mountains and sailed with pirates and flown on a dragon's back. Max had never been on anything more exciting than a picnic. At breakfast the next day with his father, he spoke wistfully of seeing faraway places and strange lands; of magic and mystery and adventure. The well-travelled count was leaving again that very morning for the ends of the Earth. The Prince Regent tut-tutted.

'A king can't leave his kingdom, my boy. Not at all the done thing.'



‘Fine,’ said Max, all his boredom and annoyance suddenly boiling over. ‘I’ll stay in the kingdom. But at least I’ll *see* my kingdom before the coronation. I’m going on a holiday. I’ll be back next weeeek – probably.’

So he took a brown horse called Edna and some old clothes, and food from the palace kitchens, and he rode off into his kingdom.

Floramonde, Max’s kingdom, is a pretty place. It’s not very large, as kingdoms go, but it has farms and towns and valleys and rivers and quite a lot of Forest. And all around it, like a rim around a bowl, it has mountains. Max thought that he would wander through some of the villages and towns, camp by a river or two, and try to figure out how he could survive being king. ‘Because if I don’t,’ he said to Edna, ‘I’m going to die of boredom.’

At the gate at the edge of the palace grounds, where he had to choose whether to go down into the valley or up into the mountains, he met the Chief Palace Gardener, Rosie. She was clipping a yew tree into the shape of a bird – or was it a dragon?

She looked up at him from under her old hat and said, ‘Good Day, Your Majesty. Be careful if you go up in the high country. There’s magic growing wild all over, up there.’ And she turned away and went off before he could say anything, he was so surprised.

Naturally he turned his back on the valley, and took the road that led to the high country.

In the high country the wind keeps moving all day and all night. Sometimes it whispers and sometimes it shouts, but often it brings news from down in the valley, or from up on the bare stone heights.



The wind is changeable. Sometimes it's friendly, breaking up the baking heat of summer, bringing rain. Sometimes it's dangerous, ripping up trees in monstrous anger, tearing branches off and sending them hurtling through the sky, howling and screaming through the rocks.

On this day in the high country, the wind brought news. It was sulky and wouldn't say much, but the people of the high country heard it whisper slyly, 'There's a stranger coming, a stranger coming,' and the dryads slipped back inside the trunks of their trees and watched from inside the wood.

Perhaps you have never met a dryad. Dryads are the spirits of trees, and they can step outside their trees for a while and be people, but they can't go too far from their tree, or they get sick. And if their tree dies, they die too. The strange thing is that dryads only live in trees that grow wild, so you never find them in parks or orchards or gardens, only in old forests and places where humans don't live.

The dryads weren't the only ones who heard the wind's message. There were many strange creatures living in the high country. There were trolls who lived in dark, narrow caves. There was a heavy-eyed basilisk who looked like grey stone. There were creatures made of rock who lived deep in the belly of the mountains. There were water spirits swimming in the clear mountain pools. But there were no humans, for humans don't live in the high country, and they can't understand the wind.

The stranger was a human.

It was a young man on a brown horse. The horse didn't bother the dryads. But the man was a problem, because there was one rule that all the dryads followed: don't let a human see you.

It didn't matter to the water spirits or the trolls or the basilisk. There wasn't much humans could do to them. But humans cut down trees; even wild trees. They were dangerous. And they were curious. So as soon as the message came from the wind about the stranger, all the dryads fled back to their trees and slid inside.

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Except for Salixia.

Salixia was a willow tree dryad and she was in trouble.

When the message came about the stranger, Salixia was swimming in the large river pool downstream from her tree. She was floating lazily, letting the water sounds fill her ears, and she didn't hear the wind until it was too late. She didn't have time to get back before the human arrived. So she hid behind the tall, rounded rocks at the pool's edge and watched.

The young man rode up between the alder trees alongside the river. He had black hair under an old straw hat. He was dusty and his boots were scuffed. His horse trudged tiredly. He was singing softly to himself as he rode, a song about blackbirds. He had blue eyes and a nice open smile. He didn't look dangerous.

But Salixia didn't dare show herself. 'A human will follow you night and day if he once catches sight of you,' the old oak tree, Robus, had once told Salixia. 'And they love to find things out. If they see you disappear into your tree they'll cut it down just to find out how you did it. In case there's a secret passage underneath.'

The problem was, the human had decided that Salixia's tree was a good place to have lunch. He got down from his horse, unsaddled it, and led it to drink at the river's edge. Then he took some food out of his saddlebag and settled under the cool, green, trailing branches of the willow, with his back against the crinkled bark.

Salixia was furious. How dare this *human* invade her special space? How dare he sit himself down as though he owned the whole country? How *dare* he use her tree as a backrest?

The human was eating his lunch with great satisfaction. She could hear the crisp crunching as he bit into a carrot. Salixia scowled. 'Vegetable eater!' she hissed.



Salixia whispered silently to her willow. She concentrated on the one old, withered branch that had been hit by lightning the year before. It hung by a thin piece of wood just over the human's head. She whispered to the tree: 'Fall. Fall. *Fall.*' Leaves fell like a green rain. Twigs fell like hailstones. The human looked up in sudden alarm. And the branch fell like a lightning-bolt and hit him on the head.

Now when a tree is hit by a branch, it can be hurt. But it doesn't cry out in pain and fall over. It doesn't turn pale and slump down. And it doesn't bleed red blood all over the moss. But that's what this human did.

The trees around Salixia started whispering. 'You've killed him!' 'Well done, Willow.' 'Turned him into fertiliser, by the Sun!'

'Oh, no!,' cried Salixia. 'What if he dies? I forgot humans were so easily hurt.'

The human just lay there bleeding, looking alarming pale. Salixia didn't know what to do. She took a step forward and then waited. Another step – the human didn't move. So she came slowly to her tree and knelt down next to him.

'He's breathing,' she said in relief, and touched his face.

He opened his eyes.

When Max opened his eyes he saw a young woman staring down at him. She had yellow hair that curled around her shoulders, and green eyes. Her skin was very pale and her eyes tilted upwards just a fraction at the corners so they seemed larger than ordinary eyes. She had a green dress on, and her hand was very gentle. Before he could blink she was gone, running silently away. He closed his eyes again, rested his sore head back on the moss and listened to the whispering of the wind in the trees around him. But he didn't understand a word.



It took a while for Max to start feeling better, but after he had washed his head in the pool and had something to eat he began thinking about the girl. Who was she? Why did she run away? Where did she go?

He decided to look for her. He saddled up his horse, Edna, and rode slowly along the river bank, looking carefully behind trees and rocks, sometimes calling, 'Hello! Hello!'

He searched for days, but he saw no-one and nothing except trees and birds and lizards. Each night he returned to the camp by the willow tree where he had first seen her. It wasn't just because he had seen her there. He felt comfortable under the tree; safe and at peace. He lay back and dreamed about the green eyes and yellow hair of the young woman he had seen.

He was determined to find her. There was no doubt about it, she was strange. Looking ahead to being a king, boringly respectable, Max wanted some strangeness in his life. If this green-eyed woman was his queen, maybe he could survive the bowing and the curtseying and the 'Yes, Your Majesty, whatever you say, Your Majesty,' that would start as soon as the crown was on his head. Maybe, together, they could change things.

So he kept on looking, more persistent, more determined, than he had ever been in his life before.

Salixia watched him from inside the willow tree's comforting bark. He was not so bad for a human, she thought. But she still hid from him, and spent her time talking to the wind and encouraging her willow to send out new leaves and shoots.

After Max had gone off on Edna one morning, Salixia slipped from her tree, ran down to the river's edge and prepared to dive in. It was a grey, warm morning, and she was tired of being cooped up in her tree, always on watch for the human. This morning she would play a little and laugh and talk to the wind that lifted the tops of the bushes, and swim. But before she could dive in, a cool, rushing breeze swept down the river. She looked up in delight and waved.

'Windrider!' she called.



It was the wind dragon, come down from the heights. Wind dragons are different from fire dragons. They are blue and silver, and long like a snake, with small wings and a large head – but they are dangerous to humans in a way that fire dragons are not. For fire dragons can burn you and rip you apart with their claws; but wind dragons can steal a human's heart and mind just by looking in their eyes.

Windrider sailed down the river breeze and hovered just above Salixia's head. Salixia smiled up at her.

‘Greetings, Windrider.’

‘Greetings, Willow,’ the dragon hissed. ‘I come to warn you, Tree Spirit.’

‘Warn me? Of what?’

‘Of yourself, Salixia. Of your own heart.’

Salixia laughed. ‘Dryads don't have hearts, Windrider. You know that.’

‘Hearts can be awakened by patience and devotion, Salixia. We have been friends a long time, and I know you. You are changing. You watch the human too closely. Beware! To love a human is dangerous for any creature of the Wild Magic.’

Salixia stared into the dragon's bright, crystal eye, the eye that would entrance a human but was safe for her. She shivered. The forest was full of stories about wild creatures, sylphs and river spirits, who had loved humans but not been loved in return. Perhaps she was thinking too kindly of the young man...

‘Beware of your heart, Salixia. For the wind grows angry that you have let this human occupy your thoughts. The willow is the wind's tree. And the wind can take terrible revenge.’

As if in agreement, the wind lifted and swirled dust around Salixia, making her cough and shield her eyes. Then it was gone, and the dragon rose with it, sailing back to the mountain top. ‘Beware of your heart, Willow,’ Windrider said as she swam the air currents. ‘Beware of love!’



The dragon's warning made Salixia think even more about the human. Before, she had watched him as you might watch a show put on for your amusement: out of boredom, out of curiosity. Now she looked at him differently. She tried to ignore him. She was afraid of caring for him. But she still found herself waiting for him to come back to the willow tree each evening, and then she watched him closely, because he was dangerous to her.

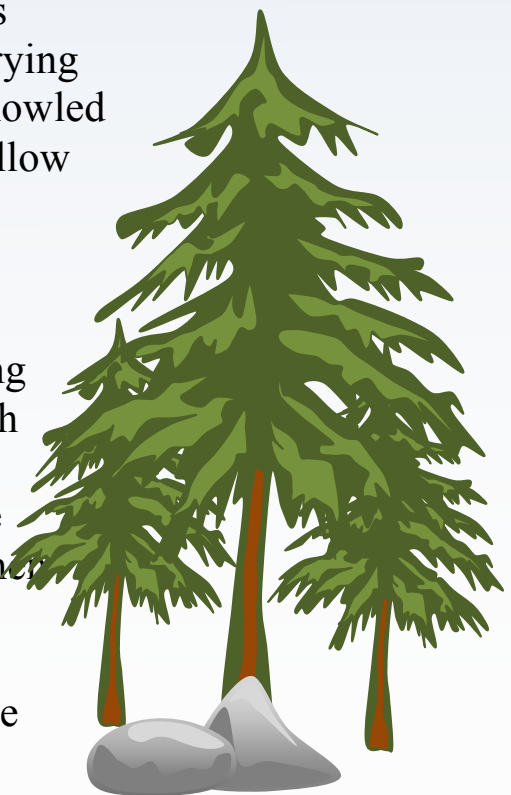
She heard him talking to Edna as he unsaddled her each night; and she smiled at his humour and his kindness. She watched him settle down under her willow tree to sleep; and she was touched by his pleasure at being there. Then one morning she heard him say to Edna as he saddled her, 'If we don't find her today we'll have to go back. The coronation's in two days' time.'

Salixia realised that she did not want him to go. All that day she thought about him, kept watch for him, wondered if she should let him catch a glimpse of her so that he would stay just a little longer.

The wind grew angry. Salixia saw the danger too late. She hadn't talked to the wind all day. She had been thinking too much about the human: when would he come back, when would he leave? The wind was furious because she cared about the human.

Too late she heard the wailing sound in her branches as it shrieked at her. She saw the clouds gathering, dark and heavy. She heard the wind crying to the lightning and thunder for help. The wind howled as Max appeared on the path leading up to the willow tree, with Edna walking behind him.

Salixia leaped from her tree and shouted to him, 'Turn back! Go to shelter! The wind hates you!' He heard and saw her, but instead of turning back he ran towards her, and the storm struck both of them. Salixia pushed him away and shouted, 'Seek shelter! Quickly!' Then she slipped inside her willow. Max stared, astonished, at the tree, then shook his head and ran to mount Edna. He rode away as fast as he dared in the swirling wind and rain, making for the rocks up on the hillside where there was some shelter.



And there he crouched beside Edna, cold and wet and scared, as the wind wailed over the rocks and sent stinging sheets of hail and rain against him. Below on the river bank, the trees were creaking and bending under the wind. Branches cracked under the strain, leaves were torn from their branches. The dryads inside the trees moaned and sobbed.

The storm was worst around Salixia's tree. She could feel it being buffeted and blown, felt branches tearing off in the gale. She made herself be strong and flexible, bending under the wind's strength so that it could do no real damage. But finally, in one last huge gust, the wind got under the roots of the willow as they hung out over the river, and pushed up, tearing the great roots out of the ground and toppling the tree. The wind sang in triumph and disappeared. Salixia screamed and fainted and knew she was dying.

The wind stopped suddenly. One moment it shrieked and howled around the rocks where Max and Edna hid, the next it was silent. There was nothing to hear except the trickling of water between the rocks and the river still rushing in its banks, swollen by the rain and hail.

Max came out cautiously. The storm was gone. Blue sky was appearing above him. The sun crept out. All around him was chaos. Branches from trees littered the ground, leaves and bark lay shredded against the rocks, there was a fresh brown scar on the hillside where some rocks had slid down under the weight of the water.

He rushed down the hillside to the clearing where he had seen the young woman disappear into the tree. It was only now he had time to think that Max realised she must be a dryad. If she was a dryad, then she would never be able to come back to Floramonde with him and be his queen. He had heard enough about dryads to know they couldn't leave their trees.

When he reached the willow he hardly



recognised it. The wind had uprooted it and flung it down. The huge roots climbed into the air, earth clumped between them. The graceful willow branches were smashed into the ground, broken off or crushed. And Salixia was lying beside it, as pale as the white willow wood beneath its broken bark.

He ran to kneel beside her. She was breathing, but faintly. He took her hand and her eyes opened. They, too, were pale, as though she were fading away.

‘Good-bye,’ she said softly. ‘leave now, before the wind comes back.’

‘How can I help you?’ Max asked.

‘You can’t. My tree-’

‘The tree is dead, Lady,’ he told her. She nodded, tears filling her eyes.

‘Then so am I.’

‘No!’ Max said, holding her hand more firmly. ‘Look at me, Lady. Hold on to me. I won’t let you die.’

‘You are human...’ she whispered. ‘You don’t understand...’

‘Yes!’ Max said. He stared into her eyes, willing her to look at him. ‘I am human. The Wild Magic doesn’t touch me. Use my strength. Hold on to me. Love me as I love you, and it will be all right. I promise you it will be all right.’

And somehow, though no-one ever knew how, it was.

Max took Salixia back to the palace with him. There was a combined wedding and coronation, and they lived happily ever after.

By

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