

THE PRINCE WHO MARRIED A LAKE

Kilroy AM

Part One: The Prince

Do you know why the ice sings?

There was a kingdom nestled by a lake (as oft there is) ruled by a king and queen of great regard. They had only a single son between them, but he was of such well nature, it didn't trouble them much. His name was Prince Navlied, and of his many deeds, all were good. With eyes of silver-blue and hair of flax, he had the valiance of a lion, and courage unmatched. In all the tourneys of adjacent realms, he rose victor. Neither wurm nor troll did bother his kingdom, for many their heads hung from the castle's hearths. No sculptor could carve his grace fully, for the warmth of his smile and character could not be captured by cold stone.

Many mornings, the prince traveled to the lakeshore to sing, which delighted the folk of the kingdom. He sang of many things; the way rippling waters and tides pass over a maiden's heart; how dawn is caught on sprigs of willow like gold in thin fingers, never able to grasp it. He

sang about all the gilded birds and blooming flowers that lined the lake's shores, and how quickly they came and went, grew and withered, as all things beautiful do. How charming twas his voice, for many times, it seemed even the lake sang with him.

So it was that many of the kingdom's folk would throw their windows open and allow the lake's breeze to carry his songs in. Bakers, most of all, found much joy in his singing. For, as you see, they must rise very early to prepare their goods in time for breakfast, before most others have even woken. Prince Navlied's voice served as company in those solemn, wee hours, when all else in the world had not yet wakened.

It is to say, without surprise, how deeply all the kingdom loved the prince.

Despite the kingdom's adoration, Navlied never seemed to find himself a lover. Many daughters of nobles swooned, and many princesses visited from afar for a glance at the famed prince. Yet Navlied seemed to always be caught up in one or another adventure, and in his downtime, was more interested in improving his skills than courting.

As time past, and grey grew in the queen's hair and the king's whiskers, Navlied's parents began to worry; for, when their time came, their only heir would be the prince. And if the prince never bore an heir, what would become of their lineage? Of their country? Surely, its rivals would descend upon the realm and divide up its peaceful lands. They spoke to their chief advisers about this, particularly the magistrate, who was the queen's brother. What would be the wisest course of action?

"We must face him with an ultimatum," the magistrate advised. "For, if he has all the time in the world to decide, he has all the time not to."

"What ultimatum can we impose?" the king and queen asked.

The magistrate thought for a long while, tapping the point of his chin..

“Invite all the women of all the realms,” the magistrate answered. “From princess to pauper’s daughter, young ladies and seamstresses. Treat them to a three day feast with the prince, with games and tourneys and wonderful entertainment. The prince will give his presence, which he ought, for have you known the prince to turn down a chance to joust?”

“But many feasts and tourneys we’ve had over the years, with many guests,” the queen said, “Yet never has a suitor caught his eye for even a second.”

“That is why you must announce on the first day,” the magistrate said, “that if the prince does not choose a bride by three day’s end, he shall forfeit his title, and his inheritance of the crown.”

“But surely, the people shall call us cruel and revolt if he finds no bride!” the king said.

“And what of the people’s fate if he never does?” the magistrate responded. “The opportunity I suggest is more than fair. Women of all kinds will attend; he will not have to search farther than the courtyard’s walls for a suitor. And both he and the women will be provided with plenty to keep merry.”

“But three days is so short,” the queen said.

“Three days may seem short to us, but for the prince, those days will seem long,” the magistrate said. “I would gamble by the second day, eager return to his steed and journey, he will choose a bride good enough.”

“If you still worry, how about this—name someone next in line. Think of it as part of the bluff.”

It was much for the king and queen to think on. For, if it worked out as they planned,

both their crown and the kingdom's future would be secured. If it didn't, both could be lost.

Further and further they discussed the details, from what day to what would be served. As for who they'd name next in line, they settled on the magistrate's daughter, Llayeid. Even if their plot should fail, she was without a husband, and the prince could marry back into the crown.

Part Two: The Feast

Every inch of the castle's courtyard brimmed as a rose bush with petals during high summer. As predicted, the prince appeared for the festivities, drawn in by the smell of warm food that flooded the castle's halls—fresh breads and glazed meats and many others things—as well as a chance to ride his steed in glorious jousts. On the morning of the first day, it did strike him that many more women were gathered than men. Perhaps, he mused, women were now allowed to compete, and the sheer number included new competitors. His thoughts ended there.

The king and queen held the first feast in the afternoon, for guests were still trickling in by horseback, cart, and foot. Every inn and tavern filled, while enough tents around the town sprung up to form a new city. What a wonder how the kingdom planned to feed them all!

In the midsts of it all a table was set up as long as a house and further, and as the event was in Navlied's name, he was placed at the very head. Navlied was not a very vain sort, though it appealed to his vanity quite so. All part of the magistrate's plan; the queen's brother was a very crafty sort.

While the first drinks were poured, the king ordered his herald to call attention—“*Hear ye, hear ye!*” the herald cried. All eyes turned, for they expected a toast. The king gave his speech as so:

“I thank all of you for your swift arrivals. And all your company, of every corner of the land. These three days shall be a feast and tourney of my son’s honor.

“However, we must make announcement as well.” How the crowd shifted, ready for a surprise. “The queen and I have decided that it is time our Navlied has found a bride, for we grow old, and it is our duty to our people that the crown has a lineage. Therefore, it is our proclamation that at the end of these three days, the prince must find a bride and marry. If he does not, then we must renounced him from the throne, and a new heir declared.”

The entire crowd before them table gasped. The prince himself paled to marble. Someone cried out, “And who shall be heir if the prince fails?”

“His fair and wonderful niece, the Lady Llayeid,” the queen answered. It was Lady Llayeid’s turn to pale, for she had not been told, in case word would spread. “But here we have gathered all the eligible women of the land. With them, three days of leisure and opportunity to enjoy their company. Our prince has never failed a task before--I assure you, it shalln’t come to that.”

“Surely so,” the king agreed.

For the rest of the meal, the prince scarcely ate. When it came time for the jousts, he was never unseated, but sat humped on his steed as if he had been. And all the time, there were women on his heels. Of them, he remembered no names, for there were so many where ever he sat. Even the princesses, of great beauty and dowries of much gold, failed to appease him. Nor the hardworking daughters of common folk, who’s lack of nobility was made up in competence.

It wasn’t until late at night that the prince escaped them all, retreating to his familiar walks of the lake shore. He stayed there late, up until midnight.

The second day came by, and the prince's mood had not improved. He was offered bundles of roses during jousts to toss to the ladies in the crowd, though he declined them. He evacuated seats when too many sat beside him. His parents organized that at every feast, a seat beside him would be occupied by a suitor, though his eyes never raised from his plate to look. In the evening, he returned to the lake shores again, pacing along the waters in distress. By now, the king and queen grew worried. What if the magistrate's plan was for naught?

"Let us call it off," the queen said. "We have tried, but our son has barely shown a single interest, and it pains me to see him so gloomy."

"But our son must have a wife!" the king said. "He may drag his feet, but he must chose. It is for the good of the kingdom. There is still one more day."

On the morning of the third day, they were greeted with a surprise—outside, the sound of singing drifted into the castle, and they knew it to be the prince's. It was not a melancholy song he sang, but a mirthful one, joyful and bright. The king and queen rushed out of their rooms, calling to their servants.

"Hear his voice," they said, "Ready a priest. Surely, he has found someone to love!"

Indeed, at the feast that morning, the prince's spirit was improved. He jousting bravely, and took part in the merriment of others. Surely, then, the people thought, he must have chosen someone!

Everyone was curious who it could be. None of the women stood forth; whoever it was, must have been very shy. The gossip flowed coarse as a river. When the priest arrived, the talk only grew louder.

Evening came, and the prince was called forth before all.

“Have you chosen a bride?” the king asked.

“Yes,” Prince Navlied confirmed.

Eagerly, everyone gathered by the lake shore, which had been prepared for a wedding. They brought crates and barrel with them, for the crowd was so thick, many had to stand atop something to see. At a clearing beside the shore was the priest, the prince, the king, and the queen.

There was some confusion after a while, for no bride had yet come in sight. The priest awkwardly shuffled, then asked if things were in accord.

“I am ready,” the prince told the priest.

“Then, my son,” the priest said—to a priest, every man younger than him is his son—“Where is your bride to be?”

“Here, Father,” the prince responded, pointing to the waters. “I shall marry the lake.”

Surely, the prince wasn’t serious. Never had they heard of a man marrying a lake, or a lake being married. The priest himself couldn’t sanctify such a marriage, for he had no idea the rites involved.

The prince did not wait for the priest to figure it out, and drew two gold rings he had been fingering in his pocket since morning. Before he could be stopped, Navlied slipped one on his own finger, and the other, he tossed into the lake.

Part Three: The Storm

Nobody knew what to do; the prince had surely gone mad. Yes, according to the king’s decree, he had chosen a bride. But did a lake count?

The story spread far and wide of the prince who married a lake. The king and queen held many meetings with all their advisers, especially the magistrate—it was his plan, after all, that set everything in motion. Jokers jested that if the prince and his new wife were to have any children, they'd sure be puddles.

A year passed, and one day, the prince went out on a quest as he usually did. The only unusual thing about it was that he didn't return. Not after a day or a week.

After a fortnight, the rains began.

It came in large droplets, mourning tears, pounding window panes and roof tops. There were gales that tore at shingles and blew over stalls. Fishermen could scarcely fish the lake, for the waters would knock their boats over, and wash away piers.

Day in and day out, the storm raged, and the folk feared the kingdom would drown. It was clear the storm wasn't natural, perhaps sent by a witch, or a warlock, or the Gods themselves. Many began

Many knights, with many men, were sent to search the neighboring lands for him. When they returned empty handed, they were sent to scour further. Traveling wizards came with wisdom of supernatural events--all left, puzzled. Even the Christian priests were called to try and appease the heavens.

Despite all attempts, the storm raged nonetheless.

Part 4: The Baker

There was a baker by the name of Albrett who, like other bakers, opened his windows nearly every morning to hear the prince's singing. He even sang along sometimes--Albrett believed that

his rye rose best with a song, and it did.

When the storm began, the poor baker found himself boarding up his windows with everything he could find, first nailing planks to board the frames, then moving dressers and shelves to block them. There came days where he couldn't go a single step out his door. If things kept up, his whole town might wash away, taking him with it.

Albrett was an observant man, and during those days when he was boarded up at home, he noticed that, though the wind and the rain blew all day and night, it lulled at dawn. Then, and only then, he could hear a voice beneath the wail of gusts—not of a man's, but a voice much fairer, calling out for someone, filled with great sorrow.

Albrett knew of the king and queen's attempts to quell the storm; all the knights and their men they called, the traveling wizards and visiting priests. What could a baker accomplish in comparison? Still, after hearing the voice at dawn, Albrett had a suspicion, and sought out the advice of his mother.

"It is as if someone is calling out, though I do not know to who," he told her.

"The weakness of sorrow is company," she told him. "If there is truly a voice that beckons, then answer." So the baker set off.

He went down to see a fisherman, and asked for use of his boat. At first, the fisherman refused, for to sail out during the storm would be certain death, and the baker was a particularly liked man. Albrett begged anyways, threatening to swim abreast if he could not borrow a boat, until the fisherman caved.

It would be easy to assume that perhaps Albrett brought something with him, an enchanted heirloom given by his mother, or maybe a special weapon to slay the source of the

storm. He brought none of the sort with him, however, and the only other thing in the boat was a fishing net and a pair of oars. Still, he set forth determined, disappearing into the thick mist that cloaked the lake. When he had paddled far enough, and the waves had begun to pick up again, Albrett began to sing.

He sang about the way rippling waters and tides pass over a maiden's heart; how dawn is caught on sprigs of willow like gold in thin fingers, yet never grasp it. He sang about all the gilded birds and blooming flowers that lined the lake's shores, and how quickly they came and went, grew and withered, as all things beautiful do. As he sang, the storm lessened, and the mist parted.

Behold, from the water rose a tall, mysterious woman to meet him—a jotun of the lake! Her skin was a pale blue, as clear water beneath ice, her hair was green with algae, and her eyes had a soft, lantern's glow like a jar filled with glow worms. Her face was beautiful, one of the most beautiful Albrett had ever seen, but when she saw Albrett, it frowned.

"You are not my Navlied," the jotun spoke disappointedly. "Leave me be, mortal, to my sorrow."

"I am not he," Albrett said, "However, I have come to find the source of the storm. If it continues, my whole town may wash away. Who are you, and why is it that this storm rages?"

"My name is Kvitte," the jotun said, "And this storm rages because my lover has left me. Before, he promised me his hand, and married me. Now, he has gone, and left me worse off."

"Why so?" Albrett asked.

"Because!" she said furiously, rocking Albrett's boat. "Who would marry a giant? Surely, now that the early throws of love have passed, he has become ashamed. See, all things beautiful

come and go, grow and wither. Here, I have his gold ring on my hand, but he has slipped through my fingers like dawn on willow sprigs. My heart is overcome with rippling waters and tides of grief, which I shall drown in one day soon.”

“Perhaps he is trapped,” Albrett reasoned. “Or, as I loathe to think, he has perished on a quest.”

“Because his heart still beats,” Kvitte said. She drew out a ring, which she held out in the center of her palm for Albrett to see. “See this circlet. Navlied promised that he would always wear his, so I would feel his heart besides mine, even when he was gone. Last he left, he said he would only be gone three days. Now, a fortnight has passed.”

Albrett took Kvitte’s ring in his own fingers, and did indeed feel a beat between his fingers, as if he were laying his hand atop a man’s breast. “If he has disowned you, then would he not have tossed his ring aside?” the baker asked. “Perhaps he is trapped.”

“If it is so,” Kvitte said—for, as a jotun, she knew creatures such as trolls who could keep their victims entrapped for years—“Then he may as well be dead. I cannot leave this lake and save him.”

“Then send me,” Albrett offered. “Leave me your ring as a guide. I will search the lands for Prince Navlied. In exchange, I ask you to lift this storm until I return with news of his fate.”

“And if you never return?” Kvitte’s voice raised. “How do I know you will not disappear as my Navlied has? I will lift the storm for only three days, and if you do not return as you promise, I will truly drown this land.”

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