

The Beasts Who Fought
for Fairyland Until
the Very End
and Further Still

by Catherynne M. Valente

THE BEASTS WHO FOUGHT FOR FAIRYLAND UNTIL THE VERY END AND FURTHER STILL
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PREFACE

Ever since the election, people have been telling me to shut up and go back to Fairyland. Be silent. Be good. Accept. Submit. Stop talking about politics. Stick to fairy tales. (As if fairy tales have ever not been about politics.) Go back to Fairyland. Go back to Fairyland.

So I did.

I have struggled since November 8th with everything I thought I understood about the world, and with what I could possibly do to help anyone. I certainly can't stop talking. I can never do that. But for once, the Internet trolls had the answer.

I have written a new Fairyland short story. It does what fairy tales do, I hope. Explain the awful to the young. Explain the awful to the old. Explain the awful to myself. After all, once you know you're in a fairy tale, you know how to get out, how to survive, how to stand tall and even dance at the end of it all.

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Catherynne M. Valente
November 2016, Maine

Dramatis Personæ

THE GREEN WIND, a Harsh Air

THE LEOPARD OF LITTLE BREEZES, His Steed

A-THROUGH-L, a Wyverary

The Beasts Who Fought for Fairyland Until the Very End and Further Still

Once upon a time, three rather large and unusual creatures grew very tired indeed of fighting, day and night and day again, fighting the same overwhelming and unyielding enemies, fighting with all their large and scaly might, as well as their claws, teeth, flaming breath, and occasionally, walloping rune-carved giant's hammers they found lying about where others had fallen. Because the sun was setting rosy in the sky, and because they could hardly bear to put one foot in front of the other, and because, at long last, their fates had been tucked firmly into bed and told to stay there or else, these three rather large and unusual beasts sat down upon a rather large and filthy hill in a country called Fairyland. The hill was filthy because a great battle had been fought there. Bronze and wicker and glass armor lay everywhere strewn about. Swords and axes and scissors and needles and a million thousand arrows turned that hill into a pincushion. Each arrow was fletched in feathers that once belonged to immortal birds so wise that if you asked them to tell you the meaning of life, they would have an answer, and it would be short, and easy to understand, and as true as tea. The three creatures sat carefully on their haunches inside a prickly prison of blades and bows and bucklers.

One was a tall man all in green, armored in a battered green breastplate and a battered green helmet and a green carriage-driver's cloak and hardy green boots. One was an enormous Leopard with a curling green saddle on her back. The man smoked a long green pipe, and wherever he went a fresh green wind followed. This was not surprising, for he *was* the Green Wind, and his cat was the Leopard of Little Breezes. Together they brought storms and sighs to all the six corners of the world. The third creature looked something like a dragon. But he could not be a dragon, surely not, for he had no forepaws. His body curved back against his powerful hind legs like a capital S. He was the color of the very last embers of the fire, and his belly was the color of old peaches. He was graceful and gallant and gregarious and grim. His huge claws were very black, his eyes were very orange, his horns were fierce and sharp, he had long whiskers hanging from his long snout, and enormous wings like bats, if bats were far bigger than houses, extremely bony, and not in the least blind.

If you have not guessed it already, this dear and daring beast was a Wyvern. A Wyverary, if we are to be taxonomically accurate, for though his mother was a proper Wyvern, his father was a library. That only sounds strange if both of *your* parents were precisely the same sort of animal, which hardly ever happens, when you really think about it. He had been named for the family business, for a library has ever so many encyclopedias, and the beast was called A-Through-L. He knew just everything about everything, so long as it began with the letters A through L.

They were all very young, really, too young for all they had seen, but too old not to have seen it. They had only just met today, having fought on the same side, and after today, they would not meet again for a very, very long time. But they had become fast friends, for that is what three people who have survived something dreadful together always do.

The Wyvern looked down from their pincushion hill of swords and arrows into a long, deep

valley. It had been very pretty down there once. Lots of blue stones and violet flowers and rabbits and foxes and minks who realized long ago that they all had soft ears and moist noses and hated hunters, and so, rather than fight each other, formed a collective for the Betterment of Us Who Gets Stalked and Shot At Just for Minding Our Own Business Whilst Being Fuzzy, and lived in reasonable happiness. None of that was down there any longer. No flowers, no stones, no softness. A great battle had been fought in the Valley of Soft Ears. The last battle of the war, in fact. A stranger had come, an outsider, a mysterious girl with untold riches and untold fury. She had sent her armies screaming through the meadows and forests to seize Fairyland for herself.

It had been a ferocious fight, all against all. One side sent Witches and Magicians and Unicorns and Manticores and Gnomes, whoever would stand, whatever would serve, until, in the end, the last warriors had no more to hurl at one another but their shoes, and then they hurled those, too. The other side Pookas and Dragons and their own Witches and their own Manticores, but most of all they sent Redcaps, in wave after wave, some riding great beasts of the air, some charging on great beasts of the earth, stout and furious creatures who kept their hats red with the blood of those they hated. Stray flashes of spent magic still burred and rumbled through the valley. Dragons, Wyverns, Sphinxes, Griffins and Harpies, the Flying Ace Corps, wheeled in long, exhausted circles, looking for stragglers to carry off. Below, the fallen lay where they had lost their last struggles against the army of Redcaps, and even the clouds had begun to weep.

“We lost,” said A-Through-L. His strong voice went all funny in his throat.

“Looks that way, Ell,” said the Green Wind. He did not sound very concerned. “May I call you Ell?”

Ell nodded and sniffed in the cold autumn wind. “The Marquess is going to rule over all of us forever and ever, and she is...she is...*terrible*.”

“Suppose so.” The Green Wind blew smoke out of both his purple nostrils. The Leopard purred and said nothing. Cats are not terribly talkative.

“But how could we *lose*, Mr. Green? It’s not possible. All the Sirens and the Witches said we’d win as easy as supper and twice as quick. They said no one so wicked and cruel and so awfully *angry* could ever rule Fairyland. They said that sort of thing only happens in other worlds that are not so full of magic and wonder as ours. All the prophecies agreed on it.”

“I think I see a Witch in that cage by the big oak tree,” the Green Wind noted, pointing with his pipe. “Being menaced by a lion.”

It was true—down deep in the Valley of Soft Ears, a gargantuan blue lion roared into a silver birdcage, where a young man all in black cowered with his arms curled protectively over his cauldron. Witches brew up the future in their cauldrons, you see. They take up a wooden Spoon and boil a soup out of everything you did today and everything you did yesterday and all the days before, and everything anyone you ever met did, too, and that is how you get a prophecy. This is very much like what statisticians and journalists do in our world, only with more tasty onions and mutton and incantations. Neither of the Wyverns could hear anything over the din of the battle’s end, but I am a Narrator, and my powers of hearing are extremely keen, for I must listen through every closed door, every secret meeting, every whisper in every corner of a tale. I shall tell you what the lion roared. It roared: *you will make a new future in your stupid bowl, and it will say all the things we want it to say*

and none of the things we do not! The new future will say that everything good in Fairyland is down to us and everything that goes sideways is down to our enemies. It will say that we are the best people, with the best plans, and the best words, and the best rulers in the history of bestnesses. Make it say the old King and Queen are liars and villains but the Marquess is a truth-teller and a champion who has released the world from sorrow forever. Make it say she is the only one who can fix Fairyland and make it great.

And to this the Witch said: *But none of that is true! Fairyland isn't broken! The Marquess lies and steals and cheats and snatches folk up for her own use and hates a great many more people than is healthy for a growing girl. Our old King was marvelous! The Queen just wasn't very good at parties, that's all. The worst thing she did was accidentally burn up a book of spells one time.*

The lion snarled: *if you say it, if you boil it up in your bowl, it will become true. Everyone believes Witches. You will be rewarded with gold and jewels.*

And when the Witch still refused, the lion thrust a paw through the bars of the cage and swiped away the young man's wooden Spoon, the great emblem of a Witch's power. *Then we do not need you,* laughed the lion. *We control the Spoon! Everyone will believe us now!*

"But we tried so *hard*," whispered the red Wyvern on the hill.

"Why should that make any difference?" answered the Green Wind, who was somewhat older and therefore somewhat more accustomed to things not going his way.

Ell frowned and stared at the churned-up dirt of the ruined hill. He scrunched up his orange eyes so as not to cry.

"Well, because....because it's a bad *story*! Stories aren't supposed to end like this. They're just not! Things are supposed to get *better*. Things are supposed to make *sense*."

The man all in green lifted one emerald eyebrow. "Oh? Did you never find a story in all of your Papa's bookshelves in which a wicked dark lord rose up and put a crown on his own head? In which the cruel tyrant covered the land in night and ravaged the countryside, destroying and devouring and devastating the lives of people both gentle and kind? Did you never find one single tale in the corner of your noble father's stacks where folk banded together and rose up against this terrible King, standing back to back and crying out: *we do not look to be ruled*?"

"Well, of course I did, Mr. Green! But in all those stories, at the *end* of all those stories, the dark lord was cast down into infinite nothingness or burnt to a crisp or at the *very* least sent to bed without supper, and everyone cheered and danced and had a party afterward. But the end of *this* story is that we lost and she gets to do whatever she wants to us forever. How shall we ever have parties again? How shall we cheer? How shall we dance? I don't think the Marquess likes dancing. I think she only likes cheering if people are cheering her name and I think she only likes parties if they're her own birthday and she gets all the presents."

"Perhaps this is not the end of the story, then," the Green Wind said kindly, though he wasn't sure he believed it. It was important to say it to the brokenhearted, to the young, to everyone, even if he didn't believe his own words. Especially if he didn't believe it. If no one said it, it couldn't even start being true.

"It *feels* like the end," said A-Through-L with a strangled cry.

"It always does, when you lose." The Green Wind took off his green helmet and laid it on the

grass between two arrows. “But haven’t we had tyrants and fools and hobgoblins on the throne before? Haven’t we had rather a *lot* of hobgoblins? Aren’t hobgoblins rather more the rule than the exception?”

“Yes...”

“And haven’t we always patched up their mischief and gotten back to more or less living how we want to live and loving who we want love and making what we want to make and being who we want to be?”

“Yes...”

“Perhaps Fairyland is stronger than her goblins, my ravishing reptile. Perhaps, if you take a long enough view, we are all stronger than our goblins.”

“But this is different! Oh, I feel it in my bones! She is menacing the Witches and hunting down the Stregas who heal our wounds and she told the foxes and rabbits and minks that they *deserved* to be Stalked and Shot At Just for Minding Their Own Business Whilst Being Fuzzy and I have heard... I have heard she even wants to outlaw the study of Queer Physicks. How will we have magic without the queerest of all the sciences? Oh, I know all about Different, Mr. Green, for it begins with D. And this feels *different*.”

“It always does, when you lose.” The Green Wind stroked the Leopard of Little Breezes’ spotted head. Far below, a Griffin cried out in pain and ran terrified from the ruined battlefield, the ruined valley which once held so many soft ears. “But perhaps you are right. I have heard worse still, Ell. I have heard the Marquess longs to build a wall between Fairyland and the human world, so that no human children may ever come here and have adventures again. Though I may have some small thing to say about that, myself. The Marquess is certainly deplorable, and she lusts after deplorable things.”

“But if she is so deplorable, why did all those noble Dragons and Griffins and Gnomes and Centaurs and Glashtyn and Pixies fight for her? She has an army of dreadful, sneering Redcaps who love her desperately and want nothing more than to stain their caps even redder with the blood of her enemies. I suppose I understand the Redcaps. It’s their nature to hurt things. But the others? There must be *something* wonderful about her if they love her desperately. You cannot love anything desperately that does not have some tiny wonder buried inside it.”

The Green Wind stared into the darkening sky for a long time. “There is a dreadful sort of spell that certain people can cast, Ell. It is a very ancient and powerful spell, but difficult to pull off. All the circumstances must be just right. If you fall under the spell, you hear a story every night when you fall asleep and every morning when you wake up and you hear it twice at lunchtime. It is a story about yourself, a story that sounds so good and true that you fall in love with it. You want to hear it again and again. You snuggle up to it for warmth. You set a place for it at the dinner table. The story tells you that the world is an easy and simple place, and you—yes, you!—are the very center of it. You are a hero, *the* hero, and nothing beastly that has ever happened to you is your fault. Very soon you will be loved and treasured and celebrated the way you ought to be, the way you always *should* have been. Very soon indeed...if only those wretched...oh, let us say Satyrs. If only those wretched Satyrs were not taking all the good bits of everything for themselves and keeping your cupboards empty.”

“Why would the Satyrs steal from me?” breathed Ell, wide-eyed. “What have I ever done to them? Are all these frightful battles *their* doing? Let’s go and talk *very* sternly to them, at once! Anything, if only I might feel safe and warm and hopeful again!”

The Green Wind laughed sourly. He shook his head. Starlight reflected in his eyes. “No, my woebegone Wyvern. You don’t understand. The Satyrs have done nothing to you. They live in the forest and eat mulberries and moonbeams and dance at their Sabbats. What has that to do with your sorrows? It’s only the *story*. You see what a good story it is! Why, it’s the story everyone and their auntie wants to hear! It’s the best story, the softest and coziest story every told! You began to believe it at once, and you have never had a quarrel with a Satyr in all your life. But the story is no good without a villain. It can’t feel *true* without a villain. Otherwise, everything would already be as it ought to be, yes? Someone has to be at fault. And if you are the hero, it stands to reason that folk who do not look like you or talk like you or like to eat the same things you like to eat must be the villains. After all, the world is easy and simple, is it not? And once people hear this story, once this spell is cast...they get lost inside of it. They cannot see anything but the story, and if anything comes along that might tear the tiniest hole in the story, they will hate it like a fanged toad, for the story has become more important than even themselves. That is what the Marquess did, only she used the foxes and rabbits and minks instead of Satyrs to finish her spell. And all those Redcaps and all those Dragons would rather die for her than let any harm come to the story that sings them to bed at night. Because the world is not easy or simple, and it is very, *very* hard to get to sleep when the dark is so deep and the cold is so sharp.”

The Wyverary twisted his claws together. “Maybe it won’t be so bad, then. If it’s only a story. If she only wants frightened people to sleep well and sleep soft. Maybe she doesn’t really mean any of it, and once she has her crown, she will be kind and good. People do all kinds of fearsome things for the sake of crowns. I’ve never understood it. Crowns itch.”

They looked down into the gruesome battlefield, now pale with mist and full of the sounds of weeping. A throng of Redcaps were stalking the wreckage, looking for anyone with wings. Whenever they found some poor half-dead Harpy or Ifrit, they pulled a long bronze chain out of a great rough sack and fastened down their wings, one to the other, with an extremely serious looking lock. Ell’s wings prickled with gooseflesh. The Green Wind said nothing. The Leopard of Little Breezes yawned, showing her teeth.

“I suppose you’re right,” Ell sighed. “It is rather silly to think the best of someone whose done all this to us already. I hadn’t much hope. But...” A-Through-L’s eyes grew very big in the dark, two enormous pumpkin-lanterns floating in the shadows. “But...oh, I know it’s a ghastly thing to say, but perhaps *I* might be safe, at least? You and I and your Leopard? We are not foxes or rabbits or minks, after all.”

“The spell grows and grows as people fall under its power. And to grow, it must always have new food. I cannot promise that the story will not start whispering in certain ears that Wyverns are lazy criminals who ruin the radiant city of Pandemonium with their dirty nests and fiery breath and loud crowing.”

“I’m not a criminal! I’ve never even been to Pandemonium!”

“It’s the story, my dulcet dragonkin. The story doesn’t care what *is* true. It only cares what *feels* true. And you are big and frightening to people who are neither reptilian nor capable of flight. Who knows? Perhaps the Marquess will even find a way to banish the Winds and we will be exiled, too.”

“Oh, I am so afraid! I am so sad I can hardly stand staying inside my skin! What are we going to do, Green? How are we meant to live? Is the Marquess’s story so strong that it can just stomp all over

my story forever? They're going to chain my wings and if I can't fly, what am I? Who am I?"

The Leopard of Little Breezes lifted her spotted black-and-gold head and rested it on the Wyvern's great red toe.

"Do you remember the first magic you ever learned, Beast?" The Leopard's voice was soft and rumbly and rough as a mother cat's tongue.

Ell did not think he knew any particular magic even now, except for the magic of being who he was. Yes, who he was was a very large, very red, fire-breathing lizard who could fly, which was a bit magical, but nothing out of the ordinary.

"The first magic anyone learns is saying No," purred the Leopard of Little Breezes. "It's how you know a baby is starting to turn into a person. They run around saying no all day, throwing their magic at everything to see what it'll stick to. And if they say No loud enough, and often enough, and to the right person, strange things will happen. The nasty supper is taken away. The light is left on at night instead of turned out. The toy comes out of the shop window. It is such old magic, such basic magic, that most folk don't even know it's magic anymore." The Leopard of Little Breezes rubbed her paw over her ear. "You can say No to that story. You can say No to the spell, to the Marquess, to the lions, to all of it. And if you say it loud enough, and often enough, strange things will begin to happen."

"But that's easy. I can say No all day long!"

The Leopard growled. "It's very much harder to say No to a tyrant than to say No to a plate of beans or a dark bedroom. Harder still to do it while your wings are tied down and blistered. And you cannot stop saying it, even if it would feel so marvelous, so easy, so much less *work* to just be silent and hope it all comes out right somehow."

Ell's eyes filled with turquoise tears. "It does sound hard. So terribly hard. I don't *want* to live through this sort of story. I want to live through one of the nice tales, the ones that take place between hobgoblins, the ones where you don't have to spend every day blistering and saying No to horrors. Why couldn't we just not have horrors at all? Then no one would have to say No."

Oh, my dear, darling Wyverary. So do we all. But so few of us get to. Not even a silly narrator like me. The only comfort there can be is that very few sagas of bravery and wonder occur in the space between hobgoblins. Perhaps, my most beloved lizard, one will even happen to you. But that is not much comfort, I know.

"But then, of course, there is the other side of the apple. There is Yes Magic," the Green Wind said gently.

"I like the sound of that better, even if it begins with Y," nodded the Wyverary.

The Leopard of Little Breezes looked up at the Wyvern with enormous black eyes. She spoke in a very soft, very serious voice, the voice any cat uses when the time for yarn and nip is past and there is only the cold night coming. "Every time you say Yes to anything, to anyone, you change the shape of your world. You agree to supper with a stranger, and now you have a friend. You say that you would certainly like to take a journey to the ocean, and now the ocean is in your heart forever. The Redcaps said Yes to the Marquess, and the world is very much changed. But we...we must say Yes to each other. We must say Yes to the needful, to the suffering, to the lonely, to those the Marquess punishes for saying No to her. We must band together, back to back, and say Yes to everyone who lost today, for we are all family now, and our loss is our new last name. If we must hide, we will hide. If we must flee, we

will flee. If we must fight all of this all over again, we will do it and complain the whole time. We must say Yes to the story where, after a long battle, the dark lord is cast down into infinite nothingness or burnt to a crisp or at the *very* least sent to bed without supper, and everyone cheers and dances and has a party afterward. But most of all, we must say Yes to the truth and the speaking of it. We must say No to silence. And perhaps, one day, a long time from now, something new and extraordinary will happen and the Marquess will be defeated, and she will blow away on the wind, no heavier than a memory.”

A-Through-L looked down into the Valley of Soft Ears. He could see the Marquess there, strutting through the ruined earth with a crown on her head and a smile on her lips, knighting her gloating generals and showering them with jewels and titles and kisses. He could see her men fastening bronze chains round anything that flew. He could see the trees drooping down in sorrow, their leaves just barely tinged with red, with autumn, with the coming of September.

“I understand what you mean,” Ell said finally. His whiskers whipped in the sour wind. He straightened his back and his scarlet tail. “I wish I didn’t, I wish I didn’t know anything about something so hard and harsh. But I do. You mean defiance. I know all about Defiance. It begins with D.”

Discover how these beasts fought further still in

The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making

The Girl Who Fell Beneath Fairyland and Led the Revels There

The Girl Who Soared Over Fairyland and Cut the Moon in Two

The Boy Who Lost Fairyland

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