

# The Human Nightingale



The Queen threw off her bedcovers. There was that sound again. She shuddered. It was such a lonely, hollow sound. It seemed to rise from within the heart of the mountain the fortress rested on. This was the third night she had been woken by that cry. It set the wolves off. The people in the villages said evil spirits were about. They said the mountain was unhappy with the new fortifications, the King was building. But the people, she thought, are superstitious and believe in nonsense.

The moon lit up her geological instruments scattered across the dressing table. She had dumped all the perfumes, lotions, and powders that usually cluttered its surface onto the floor. Her mind was whirring and clicking with new ideas.

She picked up a plan and spread it across the bed. Nothing excited her more than a mechanical drawing. It was her latest design for a drilling machine. She had had it built by the engineers working for the King and she had drilled quite deeply to find fossils and underground waterways. The King wasn't happy with her fascination for machines. It was not the behaviour expected of a queen. He told her she could work on her excavations for as long as it would take to build the fortress extension. After that, she must take up embroidery.

There it was again, that cry, from the belly of the rock. She could barely wait for dawn when she would drill into the mountain and find the creature behind the sound. It was important that she was alert in the morning, if only she could still her thoughts and sleep. She clapped her hands. A lady in waiting, stifled a yawn, and sidled into the room.

'Fetch Alberta,' ordered the Queen. 'At this hour,' murmured the lady in waiting. 'Yes,' snapped the Queen, 'Hurry.'

Ten-year-old Alberta was lost in a dream forest when her mother shook her awake. 'Come on girl, they want you up at the castle,' she said. 'Now,' murmured Alberta, leaving behind a world of whispering trees. 'Now,' her mother threw a shawl at her. The soldier at the door looked about warily. The brightness of the moon painted the shadows black. Alberta climbed up behind him.

'Watch your feet,' he warned. 'The wolves are wild tonight.' Alberta sighed. 'It's that sound,' she said. 'It unsettles them.'

Half an hour later, Alberta stood before the Queen who was lying stiffly on her enormous bed. 'I have important work to do tomorrow,' she said, 'and I need to sleep – sing,' she ordered.

Alberta searched her head for the first sound which rose from her lips, as pure and gentle as the nodding of night flowers and within minutes the Queen was softly snoring, and Alberta was tiptoeing from the room. It didn't seem fair, she thought as she ran down the passages and out onto the mountainside, that although the Queen always sent a horse and rider to fetch her, she never ordered one to take her home. Never mind, she thought, and stepped off the path to sing to the wolves, who stopped their baying and lay down in a heap of teeth and fur.

The villagers called her the human nightingale. She could bewitch any living creature with a song

The next morning the Queen was impatient. She had men called away from the cattle they pastured to cart rubble out of the tunnel she drilled deep into the heart of the rock.

Midday and everyone heard it. A roar so loud it caused a minor earthquake. Out on the meadow, a mother picked up her young children and turned for home. Alberta, washing linen at the river dropped her father's shirt, which caught by the current, drifted away. The King started to wonder about a royal divorce.

'So close' thought the Queen. One more push and she pulled a lever. The drill snapped forward and broke through a curtain of rock.

At first, there was nothing but blinding dust and a cold which stole the breath from all who felt it. And then, a rushing of wings, and a small dragon, the colour of winter broke free and beat its wings above the head of the Queen, over the soldiers at the fortress, the men from the villages, the women, children, and contented cows, even above the farmer slowly wending his way home on his horse. Out and up soared the dragon, stretching its wings to the sun, blinking in the sudden light, and roaring its freedom.

The Queen ran up the tunnel. What an incredible find and it was hers. She would catch it, tame it, and keep it as her pet, after all, it wasn't a terribly big dragon. The King saw the dragon and thought what a weapon to use against his enemies. Maybe he wouldn't divorce the Queen after all. The villagers hid in doorways. They had heard stories of dragons and weren't convinced they were ever good news.

The dragon wheeled against the sky. He suddenly realised he hadn't eaten for a few hundred years. He caught himself hungering for the plump cows on the pasture. And what were all these creatures on two legs running around, pointing sticks at him.

'I want a net, a net of iron,' commanded the Queen. 'Captain of the Guard,' yelled the King, capture that dragon.'

But the dragon seeing the advancing men with iron net, blunderbusses and hooks felt the stirring of old memories and a fire burned in his belly. He rose up and let out a stream of flame.

'Oh,' thought Alberta, and she could sense the lonely heart of the beast. His confusion, hunger and longing for mountains that stretched across the horizon, where all that could be heard was the wind.

Alberta ran. 'Hurry' shouted the Queen. 'Clip its wings' bellowed the King. 'Stop,' called Alberta and she ran to where the dragon lashed its tail from side to side. Stood before him and began to sing.

The dragon, about to belch a fireball at the girl, stopped. The soldiers slowed. The men with the net let it fall upon the ground. Alberta's voice rose pure and gentle into the air. She sang of the wild places where the dragon could find more of its kind, she sang of flight, and distant oceans, of mountain, snow and moon. The dragon understood and felt a map forming in his head. He rose and swept across the sky, turned West and disappeared from view.

At first, the King and Queen were furious with Alberta. They wanted to lock her up in the fortress for sending the dragon away, but the villagers weren't having any of that. As far as they were concerned, Alberta, the Human Nightingale, had saved them all. 'Oh, very well,' said the Queen, 'I won't lock her up.' She was already planning a machine to elevate her to the moon. 'Oh, very well,' grumbled the King, who turned back to his fortifications.

Oh, very well, sang Alberta as she walked home carrying in her heart, the grateful thanks of a small dragon, the colour of winter and every sheep and cow for miles about.

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