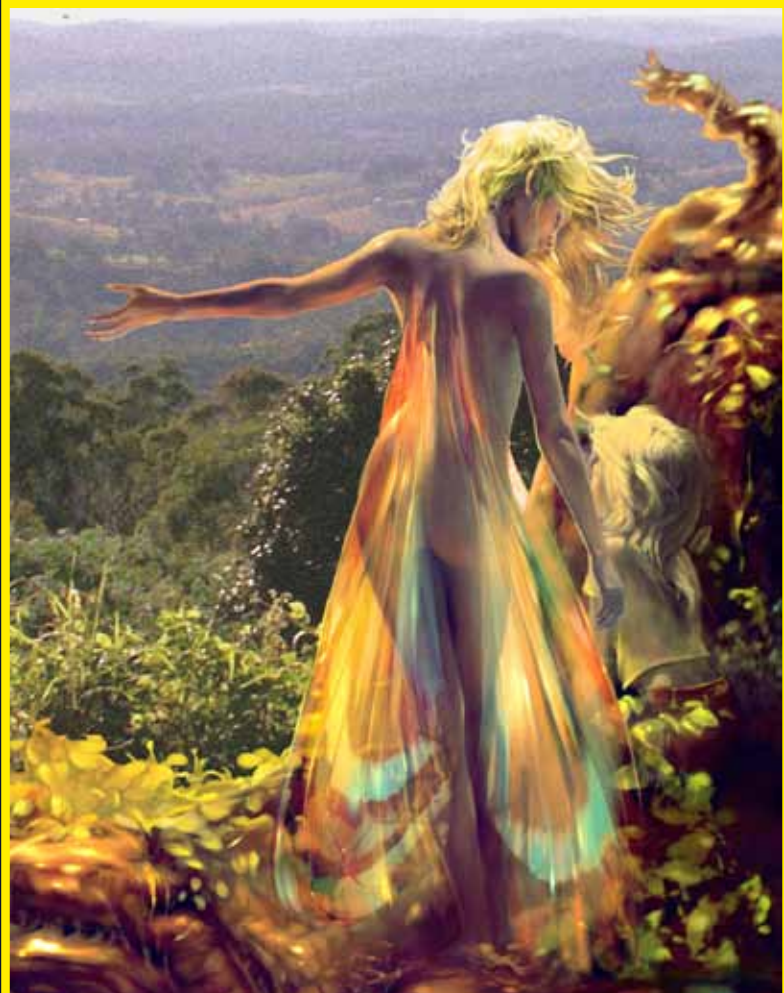


THE ELFSWOOD SAVING

Illustrated



'This will be your world, to care for.
Do not forget, when you're grown up: we elves are there to help.
Do not forget: this is our world, too!'

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen, *The Elfswood saving*

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(illustrated)

Book 1: Dána's tree

Book 2: The elf Dáa

Book 3: The wood is fighting back

Book 4: Angels and demons

Book 5: The elements intervene

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen





Book I Diana's tree

Chapter 1

Wandering in the forest

A loud creaking sounded in front of them. Startled, the four children huddled together. Did a large animal wander behind the fallen forest giant? A bear? In these wild mountains, one could still come across anything...

The creaking did not repeat itself. They did hear rustling, as if something were being dragged through the bushes. It was moving away from them, in the same direction they were going.

Bluish mists hung motionless between the tree crowns. The early sunlight cast oblique streaks through the foliage. There! A towering shadow moved along the glowing nebulae. What could be so big?

Frightened, the children turned around and sneaked off in another direction. They walked in Indian file along narrow game trails, taking care not to make any noise. In a clearing, they huddled close together and listened to see if the creaking had come after them. But it remained silent.

Only after a long time did they dare to go further. Hesitantly they stood up and looked around. They had lost all sense of direction! Where was the track that had brought them here? All the paths looked the same.

‘Are we lost now?’ asked Wendy in a pinched voice.

‘How can that be!’ Lucy was not as easily swayed as her twin sister. ‘Do we have a compass?’

They searched in their trouser pockets, coat pockets, backpacks.

‘Stupid, I forgot,’ Michael said regretfully. ‘My compass is in the bag with the camping gear, in the guesthouse.’ He looked up if he could see the sun, but the sky had closed up completely. There was only grey, diffuse light.

Little Diana pulled at his sleeve. ‘Come,’ she whispered, ‘I know which way to go.’

Without protest, they let themselves be guided by her along a game trail, which led past open spaces, where old hulking trees lay mouldering and bright white birches and metallic shining rowan trees grew sky-high. The young shoots were stretched out like gum strands in their struggle for light; their frail trunks were no thicker than an inch. The mist illuminated everything from the inside until all the stems and leaves shone as if they were oiled.

Diana hesitated as they crossed a promising game trail.

‘Look,’ whispered Lucy, crouching down to study something on the ground. ‘Traces of a very large deer, look, the prints are deep.’

‘Which way are they going?’ wanted Wendy to know. She didn’t feel like running into such an enormous animal.

‘Both sides.’ Lucy poked the ground with a stick. ‘I think last to the right, those prints look like they were made later.’



‘We have to go back to the river in any case,’ said Michael, worried. ‘Which side of the path goes down, do you think?’

‘To the right.’

‘Yes, I thought so too. Come on; let’s go to the right. That deer is more afraid of us than we are of him.’

‘You go first, then,’ Wendy fretted.

Michael took Diana by the hand and went up the wide game path. He was glad to be back in the lead and to be in charge of their expedition. For him, their walk in the forest was a voyage of discovery. He was keen to find new things, to go where no human had gone before. In fact, he hoped that they would stumble upon a miracle. Not the eerie creaking of invisible forest dwellers, but something beautiful. The desire was very strong, here, in this wonderful forest. It even felt like a promise: if he did his utmost and looked hard, he might... perhaps he could find it (her?). His heart was pounding in his throat at every turn...

After a while, the trail led over a rugged slope where mossy boulders lay scattered under a high cliff, like petrified trolls who had been surprised by the sun.

Water glistened and flowed in a thin layer on the stony path. It seemed as if they were walking through a village of dwarves, where all the inhabitants had fled into their houses and dens.

Diana laughed when Wendy remarked something like that. ‘It’s true,’ she said.

The twins looked at each other: should they make a wreath for the invisible people here, an elf house? Or was that too childish now that they were thirteen?

Because they did not know, they walked on, but they would have liked to peek under stones and in holes to see if Diana was right after all.

After a long time, there was more light in front of them.

‘We’re approaching a clearing again,’ Michael whispered. ‘Now be quiet, perhaps we will see...’ He did not dare to say what he hoped to see.

Hidden between the branches, they spied around.

Their patience was rewarded: rabbits hopped into view and continued nibbling and digging where they had been disturbed by the children's footsteps.

Then, again, creaking, hoof beats like a horse, but there was nothing to see. They held their breath.

An enormous stag emerged from an invisible game path. The girls squeezed each other and their brother with excitement. He appeared like a jack-in-the-box; they had hardly seen him move.

Michael's romantic longing for an elfin girl was instantly drowned out. This apparition was of a completely different order. This was clearly a powerful creature of nature.

Across the clearing, the old stag looked them straight in the eyes. They suddenly felt eyes on them from all sides. Some rabbits sat upright looking at them; but it were certainly not all animals looking at them...

The stag lowered its heavy head with its huge antlers, as if in salute.

Michael returned the salute politely bowing his head as well. The stag looked at them sternly, turned with smooth, broad movements and took a few steps. He looked back: were they following?

Only when he slipped between the branches, the children started to move. The rabbits hopped out of the way at ease, not wanting to be disturbed a second time by the bipeds.

The large animal led them along many winding trails to a wide-open spot near the stream. He stopped and turned his head towards them, as if to ask whether they had understood that this was the designated place.

They looked around in amazement, at each other, and then back again. Where had the stag gone so quickly? Not a branch had moved, not a step had sounded. Had they dreamed it? No, they had seen the prints of his hooves in the mud.

Hand in hand, they walked into the clearing. A solitary forest giant dominated the whole space. They looked at the gigantic beech tree with wide eyes. At its base, heavy roots snaked across the dry leaf-covered ground like giant fairy snakes. Piles of flowering grass and foxglove stood out between them. Higher up on the giant trunk, branches big as trees sprouted from the grey bark.

They stood around it and tried to encompass the trunk with the four of them. They only just succeeded.

'Gee, what a giant,' Wendy sighed. 'This is the biggest tree I've ever seen.'

The others nodded. Wendy had said out loud what they were all thinking at that moment.

Diana could not get enough of the tree. She stroked the gnarled roots, slipped her hands into crevices and hollows and finally laid her cheek against the trunk, humming softly.

'Okay, let's eat,' Lucy invited, setting out their food on a cloth. Diana let herself slide from a thick root into a hollow, where she presided like a princess on a throne.

They ate the sandwiches and enjoyed the creamy milk the landlady had given them.

It was quiet and peaceful; the countless birds and rustling breeze in the crests sang a song of wind and light and safety. Before long, they fell asleep.



Chapter 2

Unintelligible messages

Michael dreamed he was lying on his back. Above him was a black sky, speckled with millions of motionless stars.

He knew that right beside him were others; strangers, but he could not turn his head to either side. He could not move at all. He did not even have a body to move.

He felt a strong desire to see those beings next to him, but his gaze remained fixed on the motionless starry sky. He knew the beings were looking at him and asking questions, but he could not understand them. He almost thought he could sense what was being said, but the sounds moved too fast and passed by without leaving any meaning. The voices became more and more insistent, as if they were making an urgent appeal. He desperately tried to comprehend, but he could not even make out words from the random sounds. He thought they were calling his name, but it seemed as if a membrane blocked all meaning. A sense of loss made him so sad that he wanted to die in his dream.

The unfulfilled longing for the unknown beings continued to gnaw at him as he sat up dizzily. His head seemed to be filled with cotton wool, with a squeezing band around it. Rejected, he looked around.

He had failed. He had not grasped the messages. It reverberated in his head like an all-pervading echo: a unique opportunity had passed.

He got up; he wanted to wash his face in the river to clear his mind. But the water smelt strange: sweetly stale and metallic sharp at the same time, so he decided against it.

There were many dead trees along the water, which he only noticed after he smelled the water. The banks were bare, without any vegetation. Not even moss. He thought it strange, but it did not occur to him to look for a cause.

He turned round with a jolt; had anyone called him? The girls were still asleep.

There was an air of expectation around the gigantic beech tree.

Peering up, he lost his bearings in the wide crown, where layer after layer of branches and leaves formed a universe of their own. It suddenly seemed to him insanely nice to be able to live in it and walk across its thick horizontal branches. Why wasn't that for humans?

He sat down on the ground with his head between his hands, seized by a longing that he could not identify. Why were they sitting here? What was going on? How had they ended up here?

In his mind, he relived the past morning, looking for answers.

It had started with Diana feeling better this morning and it was dry for the first time in days. Finally, they could go to the forest. They had been looking forward at it for days, but it had been raining continuously.

They had left early with rucksacks full of food and drink and, just to be on the safe side, rain wear. Just before the bridge, they had taken a path along the small river. At rapids the fast-flowing water splashed and roared, but this only deepened the peace. In some places a rocky outcrop busted from the grass covered earth or a cluster of trees interrupted the smoothly grazed slopes.

From afar, the forest looked like the bubbling foam at the foot of a rapid. It, too, seemed to be constantly creeping upwards, while it remained eternally in the place where it was born.

They stopped for a moment at the edge of the forest, where the open ground changed into the fern-covered space under the trees. Oak trees overgrown with lichen stretched their broad branches out over the edge of the meadow. White-grey cows with long horns lay ruminating beneath them and watched the children without any interest.

Attracted by the expectant semi-darkness, they had taken the path that led into the forest. It was wide and free of vegetation. Yet they had the idea that no one ever came here, that the path existed only for them. There was no trace of human footsteps in the mud.

They had entered the forest and suddenly found themselves in another world.

Something had fallen away from them, it seemed as if their worries were left outside the forest. Wherever the sun could reach the ground, the soil was covered with shiny green plants with glowing white flowers and dancing sunspots, alternating with dark shadows between heavy trunks where the foliage was very dense. Majestic beeches rose sky-high. Between their lower branches, light and shadow played on the shiny leaves. They had wandered as if in a dream through the silent forest, which was nevertheless full of sounds: rustling of wind in distant crests and countless birds. Woodpeckers exchanged their staccato messages high from dead trunks; crows crowed far away. They climbed over fallen, decaying stumps, waded through ferns and carpets of blueberries; a little further they had crept through green-lit fields of lily of the valley, on their toes so as not to bruise the plants.

Michael thought back nostalgically to the time when their parents were still together. As far back as his memories went, they had spent their holidays camping in inaccessible nature reserves. They had walked on secret paths, had learned to sneak up on shy animals quietly like a cat. While playing, their parents had familiarised them with life – and how to survive – in an environment rarely visited by humans. Why had that stopped? What had happened between Mum and Dad?

With a frightened cry, the twins shot up at the same time. Startled, he knelt down by them. ‘What is it? Have you been stung?’

They grasped him with trembling hands and stared upwards, blankly. Gradually, the awareness in their eyes returned. He shuddered, for he had just experienced the same thing.

‘Did you dream like that too?’ he whispered. It did not seem appropriate to speak loudly. They both squeezed his arm and nodded, not yet able to speak. The three of them looked at Diana as if by arrangement, but she was sleeping with a happy smile. She seemed to be talking in her dream.

‘She’s just like a fairy,’ Wendy muttered.

‘I dreamt that I couldn’t move,’ Lucy mumbled.

‘You too? Me too!’ Michael and Wendy whispered simultaneously.

‘I was called upon, but I could not understand.’

The other two nodded. They had dreamt that too.

They kept watch on Diana until she would wake up on her own. The dream still lay heavy in their dazed minds; the urgency of the messages they hadn’t be able to grasp shimmered through their nerves.

‘I think it’s going to rain again,’ Wendy whispered after a while. ‘What shall we do?’

‘Let’s wait a bit. Maybe it will pass.’

‘I don’t trust it,’ Michael said. ‘We are going back.’

‘Back?’ Lucy scrambled to her feet to find the path by which they had reached the clearing. ‘Which way?’

‘Oh, look!’ Wendy pointed in the other direction. Lucy and Michael also stood up and saw why Wendy’s voice had sounded so surprised. There was a small path upstream the river. It had to be the same path they had originally followed into the forest. How they could have lost it they did not understand, but it made walking back to the village a lot easier.

Diana was having trouble waking up, so Michael had to carry her. They passed without difficulty the point where they had got lost on the way in. The path actually went on, but low-hanging branches of a couple of yew trees blocked it off. Lucy and Wendy bent them aside so Michael could pass with his sleeping burden. When he looked back, the passage had disappeared, as if it had never been there.

At the edge of the forest he set Diana down.

‘From here you will have to walk on your own, little mouse,’ he panted. ‘I’m too tired to carry you any further.’

Barely awake, she let her sisters drag her by the hand.

As they entered the village, they were caught by a heavy downpour. It stank horribly, as the heavy rain swept brownish-yellow smoke to the ground from the chimney of a factory that stood alongside the railway.

In the boarding house, they were taken care of by a worried landlady. There was nobody left, she told defeated. Because of the stench of the factory, the few other guests had left.

Chapter 3

Stranded and alone

Michael stripped off his raincoat, while the landlady peeled Diana out of her wet clothes and wrapped her in a blanket on the sofa. Lucy and Wendy went upstairs to change.

With a knot in his stomach, Michael sat down at the telephone and tried for the umpteenth time to reach their father at work. He had already seen on his mobile phone that his father had not yet responded to his text messages. This time, too, he was nowhere to be found, or so he deduced from the poorly intelligible comments at the other end of the line. His plea they should inform his father to call back as soon as possible was answered in unintelligible Slovakian. Despondently, he hung up.

The weather was more and more unpleasant. They had returned just in time. Michael shivered every time a gust of wind rattled the windows. The whole chalet creaked under the heavy gusts. It reminded him of the train accident that had happened three days ago and which had brought them here.

The images came up again unwillingly.



It was if the elements themselves rebelled. He remembered an old man in their

compartment, who was particularly worried about landslides, because so many slopes had been cleared for ski slopes or by excessive logging. It was already dark when in a sharp bend the train came to an abrupt halt with screeching brakes; passengers fell over each other, breaking branches scratched along the glass; a violent shock ran through the wagons.

In the sudden silence children started to cry, people screamed; here was shouting, doors slammed. The old man got out to look.

A long time later, he came back and sat down on the opposite bench to tell what he had found out.

‘A tree fell on the tracks,’ Dad translated for his sisters. ‘Right in front of the train; no one is hurt, but the train can’t continue. The engine is broken because a branch went through the cooling system. We have to stay here. The conductor went with some men to get help, but they have to walk back along the track. There is no mobile phone coverage here.’

That meant they were really in the middle of wilderness.

‘Well, that was just about it our destination for now,’ Dad had grumbled. ‘It seems we have to stay in these parts.’

Michael could still remember very well how he had shot upright at these words. Had they been stopped for some reason? It had felt like that, but why? By whom or what?

He was startled out of his thoughts when Diana suddenly moved wildly beside him, as if she were fighting. Alarmed, he shook her. ‘Wake up, Diana, wake up!’

Slowly she emerged from her nightmare.

‘Thirsty,’ she whispered. Michael poured a glass of water, which she emptied in one gulp.

‘Pee.’

‘Can’t you do it yourself?’ He was reluctant to have to fetch a potty.

‘Can’t walk.’

He briefly considered bringing in Lucy or Wendy.

‘I’ll take you.’ He carried Diana to the toilet and helped her.

She clung to him when he tried to put her back on the sofa.

‘What is the matter?’ he asked softly.

‘I don’t want to sleep anymore,’ she suddenly sobbed. ‘Then all the monsters will come to get me.’

‘Here, hold my hand, they won’t dare.’

He had held her like that on the stranded train, her little hand in his. Only then it had been a very cold little hand. By the light of their torch, the old man had indicated on their map where they were stranded.

‘Look, on the other side of this ridge is a pristine valley,’ he said with an undertone of reverence in his voice.

‘Branoč,’ Dad had muttered. ‘I know that place. I’ve been there once. There’s a very special forest in the valley. And there’s a railway leading to it from Jablun.’

Diana had looked at Dad intensely, but he had said nothing else.

In the first light a rescue train had finally arrived. Cold and hungry, they had stumbled past the devastation. Men with chainsaws had already begun to remove the fallen tree. Their train was badly damaged and would have to be towed away. Fortunately, a passenger train had also come along.

‘We’ll take the train to Branočs in Jablun and stay there for a night to recover,’ Dad had said. ‘I know a nice guesthouse, from before.’

In Jablun, they had got off the rescue train and had a full breakfast in the station restaurant. They got tickets to Branočs; it was only one stop and the little diesel departed almost as soon as they got on. He could still remember how excited he was when they got off the train. As if they had been on their way to this place all the time, to this valley and the vivid green of the forest they had seen from the train. As if they were coming home.

He shifted on the couch, the leg Diana was lying on began to sleep. She awoke to his movement, but continued to hold his hand.

‘Hey little mouse, are you there again?’ he greeted her, more cheerful than he felt. ‘Tell me what you want. A drink? Or do you need to go the bathroom again?’

‘Upstairs,’ she whispered.

With a sigh, he picked her up and carried her upstairs to the room he would have shared with Dad. Lucy and Wendy were probably in their own room.

He undressed Diana, laid her on the bed and stood at the window, a little lost. His gaze wandered along the track, past the signals that were green on both sides, over the shiny wet platform.

Where was Dad? Had he brought them here to... to get lost? What if it never stopped raining? Because of the rain, all things had gone wrong with Dad’s project. They had just left Jablun when that damn mobile phone rang. Arrived at the guesthouse, the first thing Dad had done was to make endless phone calls to his work. He had left on the next train. They hadn’t heard from him since. That was two days ago now. Could he have crashed?

‘Dad,’ he groaned. Fear that lurked in dark corners fell over him like a suffocating wet cloak. Their father had left them behind, in this remote valley between steep slopes and dark spruce forests, in a village where hardly anyone lived. Maybe he was dead or missing and nobody knew that he left his children here.

‘Dad, please come back,’ he whispered.

A little later, almost inaudibly: ‘Mum.’

A soft noise sounded behind him. It broke the grim haze that threatened to engulf him. Diana lay looking at him with wide eyes, glowing with fever.

‘Will you read to me?’ she whispered. ‘I don’t want to sleep any more. I keep having horrible dreams about monsters trying to get me.’

His fears faded into the background. With a gentle expression on his face, he sat down on the bed. He stroked her hot cheeks and picked up the fairy tale book they had brought from home.

'Where had we ended last time? Oh yes, the enchanted boy was walking around the place where the Elf Hill had opened, on midsummer night.'

The story inspired him to transform it into a real spectacle. Diana was captivated by the narrative, including cooing nymphs, hoarse gnomes and sweet-voiced elves in succession. It was as if he were the narrator and, at the same time, the enchanted boy who was searching ever more desperately for the fairy princess. One day the elves would come out again, one day he would see his dream princess again...

Filled with his own imagination, he looked down at the glowing child beside him. She had fallen asleep.

Without waking her, he got up and walked to the window. That longing in him, was it really for an elf?

Get a grip, he reminded himself.

