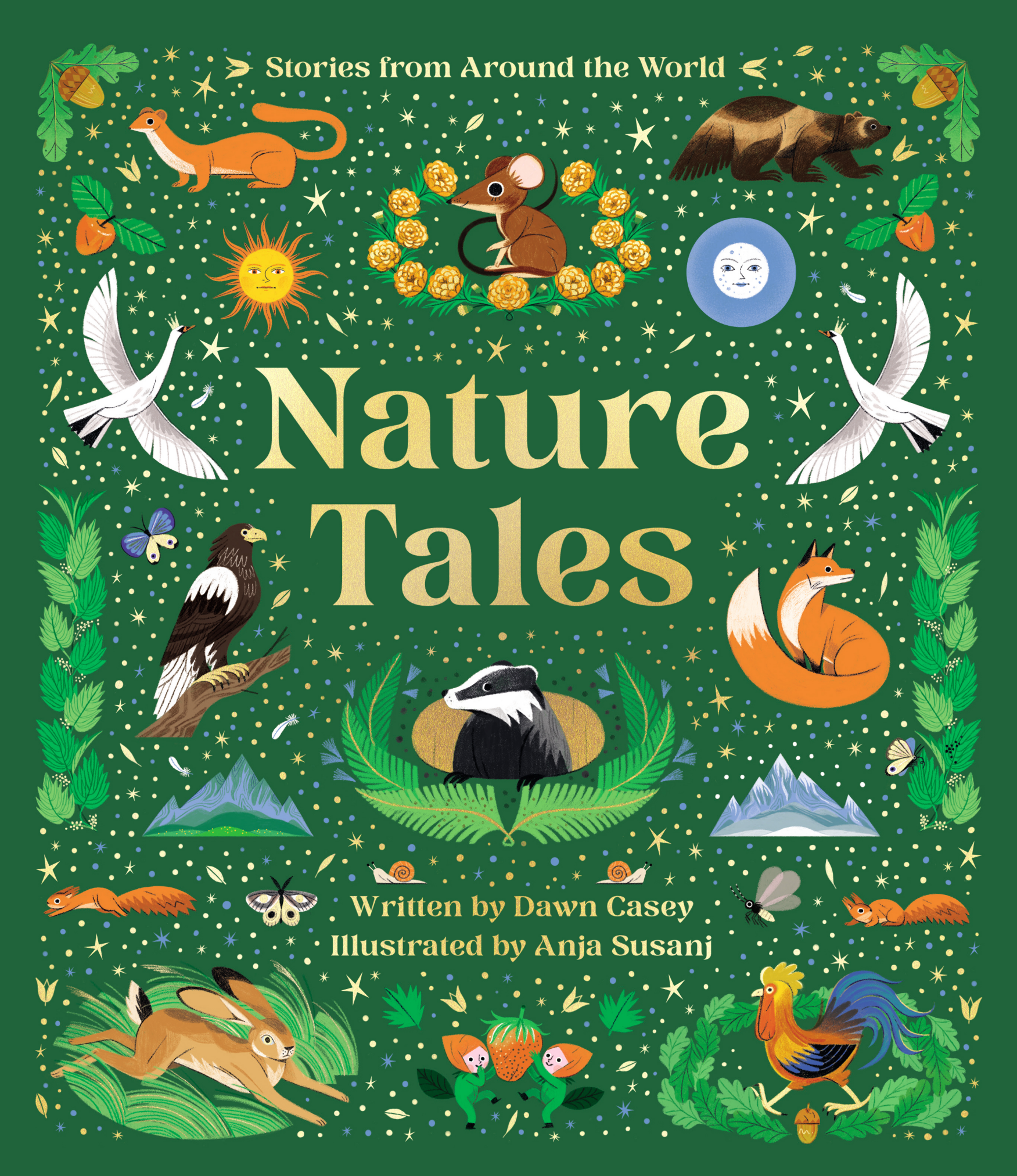
Stories from Around the World



Nature Tales

Written by Dawn Casey
Illustrated by Anja Susanj

Nature Tales



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For all my relations – **D.C.**

To my late grandmothers: Ljubica, who sang ancient songs and told the strangest stories, and Josipa, who helped me find Nature. – **A.S.**



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A Note from the Author

"Stories are among our most potent tools for restoring the land as well as our relationship to land." – Robin Wall Kimmerer

I grew up in London, where there were no fields, no farms, no forests. Yet, even in the city, the natural world reaches out to meet us. I wished upon the dandelions that grew through the paving cracks. I feasted on blackberries that thrived on forgotten fences. I played darts with wall barley, stirred petal-potions and made homes for thistledown fairies.

And I read books by Beatrix Potter, Alison Uttley, Jill Barklem, Kenneth Grahame – books that introduced me to woods and hills and hedgerows, and all the little folk who live there. I heard old tales, of golden apples and nettle shirts, talking animals and singing trees. Stories that affirmed what children already know: that the Earth is alive, the world is magic. So, though I'd never seen a hedgehog or met a mouse, I felt I knew them, and I loved them. It is my pleasure to introduce a few of these dear friends to you.

Here are stories that honour and celebrate the plants, the trees, the birds, the animals, and remind us that they are all our relations, and can also be helpers, healers, wisdom teachers.

Our ancestors knew that stories carry living wisdom. Facts are easy to forget, but stories touch the heart, speak to the spirit, fire the imagination. So I include tales that help children remember that the little stub-tailed bird, hopping in the hedgerow, is Wren, and that the generous gift of fruit that Apple Tree gives helps us to stay healthy. That Oak teaches patience, Nettle protection, and Badger how to walk the old ways. I share stories to nurture a sense of kinship and belonging. Reverence and gratitude for life. And stories to show us that what has been lost can be restored.

I have stitched these ancient stories with threads drawn from the real lives of each being. The tales are rooted in the understandings of our ancestors and in the truth of the natural world. And they are written especially for telling aloud.

So sit beneath an oak and tell *The Magic Acorn*. Eat blackberries while listening to *Bramble's Gift*. Tell *The Bear of Heaven* under the stars. And share the story of *Little Lark, Robin Redbreast and Jenny Wren* beside the fire, outside – surrounded by feathered friends.

May these stories light our hearts with love for all life.

Dawn Casey

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Bringing Back Wolf

A folktale from Mexico

The cycles of nature show us that life is not linear (with death at the end of the line). In the cycle of life, death and birth are two sides of the same door. This story offers heartening wisdom: that even when much has been lost, we can create the conditions for life to thrive again. Our heart songs – our visions, our prayers, our actions, our creations – can have miraculous effects. The journey of restoring the wild has begun.

For thousands of years, grey wolves roamed wild across the north lands. But in Yellowstone National Park, in America, by 1926 the last of the wolves had gone, shot by a human hunter. In 1995, wolf-lovers set fourteen wolves free. Now Yellowstone is home to a hundred wolves. The silver she-wolf lifts her head and howls, and a chorus answers – a thriving tribe of wild wolves.

In the old time, in the always time, there is an old woman. She is known by many names. Bone woman. Wild Woman. Wolf Woman. La Loba.

Her work is gathering the bones. From the high rocks and the dry riverbeds, she gathers the bones. One by one by one. She collects them together in her cave.

She keeps them safe. The black cave is filled with white bones. The curving antlers of deer,



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the rattling tailbones of snakes, the white skulls of black crows. And wolf bones. Hip bones. Jaw bones. Rows of sharp teeth. Knobbly thigh bones. Slender ribs. Tiny toe bones.

She lays out the bones, each in its own place, fitting one bone to another bone. Bone by bone. Until the shape shines before her – whole again.

She sits with the bones. She sits with the fire. She allows her song to arise. When the time is right, she lifts her arms over the bones – she begins to sing.

A song of love and life. An old song. An always song. And as she sings, the bones resonate, vibrate. Rattle and shake, as if they are full of life. They are full of life! As she sings, flesh begins to fill the spaces between the bones. Muscle and sinew and skin. Fur prickles and bristles. A coat as strong and shining as silver silk. Lean limbs. Soft paws. Sharp claws.

La Loba sings and the tip of the creature's tail begins to quiver, and to curl upwards. A shaggy silver plume, a flag – waving life.

• BRINGING BACK WOLF •

La Loba sings over and over. The creature's ribs begin to rise, and fall, and rise again. Breath. Like the waves of the sea.

La Loba sings and the creature's heart begins to beat-beat-beat, like a drum.

La Loba sings so deep the ground beneath her feet begins to shake. And the creature opens its eyes.

The wolf lives. She leaps. Stretches her spine, rolls her shoulders. She lopes – away… down through the rocks.

Somewhere, the wolf is running free, splashing through sunlit rivers, moving through moonlit glades. And sometimes, when the light is right or the shadows shimmer, and she lifts up her head and howls, the sound makes the ground shake. The sound of a song of love and life. And all around, the mountains ring.



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The Nettle Queen

A folktale from Denmark

Nettles grow in great families and give us many gifts: food, medicine, cloth and dye. Nettle leaves are so rich and tender that many creatures love to eat them – the plant uses its sting to make sure that not too many of its leaves get munched! Nettle tea is zingy green. Nettle soup helps our bodies and bones grow strong and healthy. People have been using nettle stems to make cloth since Bronze Age times.

Once there was a king who had six sons and one daughter, Eliza. The king loved his family dearly. So, when the king's wife died, he was sunk in grief. But his advisors told him: the country needs a queen! Besides, the children need a mother. So, though his heart had not yet healed, the king married again.

His new queen felt at once the lack of love. Hurt hardened her heart. One day, when the boys woke her with their noise, she snapped. "Get out!" she shouted. "Just go! Fly away!"

Words have power. As she pointed, the boys' skin sprouted feathers. Their arms became wings. Their necks stretched. And they flew; six white swans.

And the girl, Eliza?

Now, the queen made a strong, dark dye – in a great pot, walnut shells bubbled and brewed. She poured the dye into Eliza's bath. It stained her hair and changed her face – she looked so different, even her own father did not know her.

"Who let a stranger in here?" he cried. "Throw her out!"

Eliza fled, into the forest. She wandered the woods, wishing her brothers were with her. But the trees and the plants, the birds and the animals were all with her. She talked to them, as if they were her brothers.

"Hello, Butterfly!"

"Hello, Nettle, may I pick a leaf? Ow!"

The sting made the tips of her fingers tingle. Just then, along came a woman, gathering nettles for soup. She picked a dock leaf for Eliza, to soothe her skin. She showed her the tiny butterfly eggs, sheltered beneath a nettle leaf. She taught her how to pick the very top tips of the plant, which are best to eat. Eliza thanked the woman, and she asked her, "Please… Have you seen six boys – princes?"

The woman shook her head. "No… no princes… But I did see six swans, down on the river."

Eliza followed the river all the way to the sea. But she didn't find her brothers. She did find a white feather, on the shore. She sat on the sand with the feather in her hand. And as the sun began to set, there came a sound – over the pounding of the waves – the singing of wings.

From over the horizon came six wild swans. As they landed, their white feathers fell away. There stood six boys – Eliza's brothers! Then there was hugging and kissing and laughing and crying, and more hugging.

"Every day, when the sun rises, we turn into swans," said her youngest brother. "We only become boys again when the sun sets. We live far off over the ocean, but every day, we fly back, to look for you."

"Now you've found me," said Eliza, "Take me with you!" So Eliza and her brothers gathered supple willow and tough rush, and together they knotted a net.



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Eliza sat in the net and her swan-brothers lifted her clean into the sky. They carried her over the sea. But the net was heavy. Their flight was slow. When the sun began to sink, they were still far out over the ocean.

And all around, black clouds were massing, thunder crashing, lightning flashing. And the sun, sinking…

From the seething swell rose a black rock. Just as the sun set, their toes touched land. All through the storm they clung together, as the freezing waves crashed over the rock.

But next morning, the last shreds of storm-cloud blew away, and the sun shone. The swans flew on. The sun dried Eliza's clothes and warmed her skin. The sky-cradle rocked softly, and she listened to the lullaby of the sea. She looked down and she saw castles in the clouds, glowing pink and gold. Was it the realm of the faerie queen, or was it just a dream?

The vision vanished, and Eliza saw real land below. Mountains, trees… a cave in the hillside. Here, the swans landed, and rested. In the cave, their carpet was sun-soaked moss. Their curtains were green creepers. And all around, great families of nettles thrived.

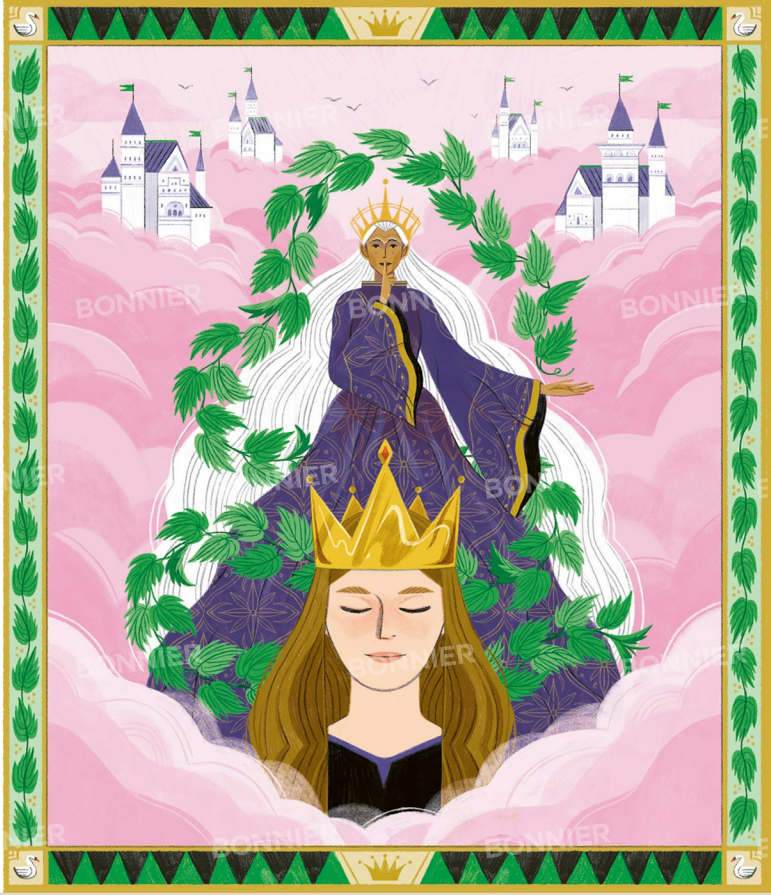
That night, Eliza prayed. Please, help me set my brothers free. She slept with a swan-feather in her hand. And as she slept, she dreamed. In her dream, she felt herself rising up into the air, light as a feather. She was flying, into a land of sun-pink clouds. And there was the queen of the faeries – she looked just like the woman of the woods.

"There is a way to help your brothers," said the woman. "Gather the wild nettles. Make the fibres into fabric. Make each of your brothers a nettle shirt. But, from the moment you pick the first nettle, to the moment the last shirt is done, you must not speak one word."

The woman handed Eliza a nettle. Eliza took it, and at the fire of its touch, she woke.

She began at once. With bare hands, she stripped the leaves. With bare feet, she stamped the stems. From the split stems, she drew out the fibre, and twisted it into thread. She made needles from sticks of wood, and knitted a nettle shirt. She did not speak one word.

The days fell into a green rhythm. Eliza wrapped her silence around herself, a cocoon of quiet. She found that, without words, she heard more. The conversations of the birds, the songs of the trees, the whispered wisdom of the waters.



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Until, one day, the silence was shattered by the blast of a horn. Baying, barking dogs – hunting hounds. And a man, a king, kneeling before her.

"Your hands!" he cried. "Come with me. My doctors will help you."

Eliza looked at the king, but she didn't say a word. So he lifted her up onto his horse.

And away they sped, to the palace. Eliza was given gowns of velvet and gloves of silk, to soothe her hands. Every day, the king tried to find a way to help the girl smile. Eliza grew fonder and fonder of the kind and patient king. She longed to share her story with him, but she did not speak one word.

Every night, Eliza stamped and tramped, twisted and knitted. Until she ran out of nettles. She knew where more grew…

…in the graveyard. In the green gloom she picked the stinging stems. But from the shadow of the church, the bishop was watching her. And he ran to wake the king. "A witch!" he hissed. "She's a witch! Picking nettles for her spells."

The king refused to believe the bishop's words. But the people of the village did:

"So that's why my cow gave no milk."

"That's why my crops didn't grow."

"She's why – the witch!"

The king begged Eliza to speak, to explain herself, to free herself. "Eliza, witches are burnt at the stake – it's the law." But still, Eliza did not say a word.

Even as they tied her to the stake, Eliza worked on the last shirt in silence. Even as they lit the blaze, and the first flames began to lick towards her.



Then came another sound, over the blaze of the flames: the singing of wings… down from the sky came six wild swans. The swans circled round Eliza and she threw the green shirts over their white heads. One by one by one, the swans turned back into boys.

The blaze smouldered and smoked, sputtered and died, and the charred wood put down roots, and sent up shoots, and burst into leaf, a green blaze of life.

And so the spell was broken. Eliza's brothers were free at last.

Later, Eliza spoke. She shared her story with the king. And the king listened, with tears in his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Eliza… for all I've allowed. The law is wrong. I see that now. I will change it myself." He looked into Eliza's eyes, as green as the weeds of the woods. "I love you, Eliza. Could you ever… Would you … be my queen?"

Words still tasted strange on Eliza's lips, after so much silence. They were quiet, but clear. "Yes," she said. "I will."

And so Eliza was crowned. Alongside the king, she ruled wisely and well. She shared her love of the plants with the people of the land. And so the people learned to love the weeds, and they gave Eliza a new name – they called her the Nettle Queen.



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