The Dancing Mice and the Giants of Flanders

by Laura E. Goodin

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With a wood-splinter needle and fibres pulled from a scrap of woollen cloth, young Elisabeth fastened feathers together. The feathers were stiffer than she'd thought, and she fumbled, trying to hold them steady with her chin while she sewed. The vision of mystery and magic in her head faded as she stared mournfully at the tangled mess in her paws.

A single tear fell, matting the feathers.

Her sister said, "I could help, if you like."

"No. But thank you," said Elisabeth.

Her mother laid a gentle paw on her head, saying nothing, and then left her to grieve.

Her favourite cousin, who had stopped by to borrow a few bits of scavenged red satin for her own mask, murmured, "Three days left—oh, Elisabeth. I'm so sorry."

Elisabeth turned her face away. "Thank you," she whispered. Inside her, thoughts fluttered like panicked birds against a cage. No mask. No dance. No way to meet the young mice from whom she could choose—must choose—a lifetime mate. Each full moon they

came to the masque: newly adult mice, tense and eager strangers, brought together in the dance. By the next moon, it would be too late, and others would take her place, while she accepted a short life of loneliness and hunger.

Elisabeth looked again at the dishevelled feathers and threads in her lap. *The mask shows the maker,* she thought. *I am confusion and clumsiness.*

She carefully set the mess aside. "Excuse me," she said, and went to the mouth of the burrow to sit in the red light from the setting sun. The light spread like water across the endless fields.

It was then that the crooked mouse came to her. She was small and old, and her head was set at an awkward angle on her neck.

"Tell me," the crooked mouse said, "why you are so sad."

Elisabeth hurriedly wiped her eyes. "I thank you, madame, but all is well with me."

"To be so young and pretty, and so sad, is not a crime; but to lie?" said the crooked mouse, with a hurt expression.

"I am sorry, madame."

"Tell me what troubles you," said the crooked

mouse, one paw stroking the soft, grey fur on Elisabeth's face.

"I will die alone and childless, madame."

"How can you know this?"

"Because I cannot make a mask, madame."

"So much depends on so little, does it not?"

"Yes, madame."

The crooked mouse paused, as if in thought. "Perhaps I could teach you."

"Alas, madame, time grows very short."

"There is a way."

Longing crashed and swirled within Elisabeth. "What is the way?"

"Give me your paw," said the crooked mouse.

Elisabeth, little more than a child, gave it instantly into the crooked mouse's grasp. Suddenly the world roared and spun in angry clouds of red and black, and she tried in vain to snatch her paw back from the agony.

And just as suddenly, the pain stopped, but the crooked mouse did not release her paw. Elisabeth stared at her sideways, panting in her terror and straining against the crooked mouse's grip.

"There," said the crooked mouse.

Elisabeth looked down at her paw. There was a small cut, blood-smeared.

The crooked mouse held out her own paw, also with a bloody cut. "This is the way it's done. I have given you the knowledge. Go. Make your mask. Find your love and your future." She waited, then said, "No thanks for an old mouse?"

Elisabeth looked down, ashamed despite her fear. "I am sorry, madame. Many thanks."

By the time Elisabeth looked up again, the crooked mouse was gone. Elisabeth waited until the sunlight had gone and the moon had risen before she returned to the burrow. Three days before the full, the moon gave plenty of light down the tunnel. Elisabeth gathered together the feathers and strings, and began again.

She saw how to bind the feathers: the exact place on each quill that would connect it with grace, balance, andstrength to the others, the way to shape a form that looked like the sweeping wings of dreams. The colours ran from one to the next in subtle gradients that baffled the eye delightfully. And the whole mask was light, airy, easy to see and speak through. It was a masterpiece.

Her cousin, who had not wanted to leave while Elisabeth was so troubled, looked over, and gasped.

Elisabeth started, and her paw convulsed with a sharp pain. The mask fluttered to the ground. Her cousin picked it up. "It's so beautiful!" She embraced Elisabeth and tried to lead her in a little dance.

Elisabeth pulled away. "I'm tired," she said.

"Of course," said her cousin, puzzled and hurt. Elisabeth caught up the mask and brought it to the darkest corner of the burrow, where she lay clutching it until morning, her paw throbbing.

***

In all the towns of Flanders, the giants sleep. Kings, peasants, Vikings, villains, pirates, dogs, cats, fish, unicorns. On this saint's day or that, the townspeople bring them out in a joyous parade. In each town, certain groups are charged with their giants' care. They oversee their construction, maintenance, and storage, and the strongest carry them in the processions. The giants' faces—the ones that have faces—are broad and beaming, and more than a little alarming. They are not the hundred-foot giants of story; they must be carried by men and women, after all. Rather, their size is one of extravagant spirit, pinioned by wood and wire and painted papier-mâché.

In between the practices and parades, the giants lie motionless in empty rooms, and the men and women who build them know nothing of the tales told by the beasts and birds of Flanders, tales of the giants' mighty deeds. One might find it difficult to imagine these still figures dancing and twirling and full of life and power. But it is often true—is it not?—that what we see, perhaps even what we can imagine, is not all there is.

***

Elisabeth stood with her cousin close to the bramble wall. Moonlight through the thorny vines made lattices on the dirt dance-floor, and the air was sharp with the smell of leaves. Owls and bats flapped overhead, lending a certain sense of danger, although they could not reach through the brambles.

An orchestra of mice struck the stones and sticks and blew through the blades of grass that made the dancing music. A hundred mice, resplendent in masks,

trotted and leapt in dizzying figures; or else found corners in which to chat with new and intriguing acquaintances.

The crowd in the centre pulled back to make a space. Within it, one mouse, wearing a mask of grass woven to look like flames, began to dance alone. Graceful and lithe, he made shapes that drew the moonlight after him like a fiery wake. He moved limbs and tail and head to make a secret writing of desire and despair. *Lonely, lonely,* he wrote with his body, *so lonely. Is it too late? Is there still time? Is there someone?*

There is me, thought Elisabeth yearningly. But she did not move to him, did not move at all.

Perhaps it was her very stillness that caught his eye. Or perhaps it was the beauty of her mask. In any event, he stopped quite suddenly and stared directly at her. His paws stretched toward her beseechingly, and, like one bewitched, she came to him.

The feel of his touch made desire flood through her, savage and wordless. It filled her until she trembled. Her paw began to hurt again, but now the pain was a thousand times worse. Red and black, roar and shriek, it spilled from her and filled the clearing. Mice scattered, adding their own shrill screams to the din.

Elisabeth spun around in a panic. In the darkness

where the grasses began again, she saw the crooked mouse looking at the confusion and terror. And the crooked mouse smiled.

Elisabeth began to dart here and there, seeking shelter from the roaring evil. But there was none. The evil filled the clearing and tore through the grasses and blew down into the burrows where tiny mouse babies wailed and huddled, and their mothers stared wide-eyed at nothing at all.

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In a garage in Météren lay the giant that was the four sons of Aymon, a towering figure topped by a single four-faced head. At the moment of sunrise, eight eyes blinked, then flicked right and left. There was no Crusade now. The brothers' magnificent Bayard cantered riderless in some faraway forest of myth. But there was something yet to be done.

***

The moon set and a cold dawn came. Elisabeth was hunched alone in the dirt. She shuddered again and again, each time thinking, *What have I done?*

She heard the sound of paws in the nearby grass, but she did not look up until a voice said, "Elisabeth."

Elisabeth started back in horror. "Madame, leave me, leave me, go away!"

"I will never leave you alone again, for we are bound by blood and by the deed you did for me."

"What did I do?" Elisabeth cried.

"You became the gateway, through your desire

and your youth and your ignorance. These are powers in their own way, and with them I can bind darkness and terror and death to me, never to threaten me again. But these powers demand work to do, bound or unbound—and it suits me that they do. I will turn them against this world of dullards and simpletons, with their moonlight masques and foolish lives. Small loss. When the powers are sated and my enemies destroyed, I will live on, unassailable."

"I will shut the gate, then."

"You cannot. Now that the powers are free, every mouse in Flanders will be mine to command."

"What are we, that you wish to command us? So small, so weak, we live for only a few full moons and have our—babies—" Elisabeth began to cry as she thought of the babies she, herself, would never have, and the babies who had screamed and hidden their heads in their mothers' sides. She had heard them as she crouched in the dirt all that cold night.

"You will be my eyes and ears, my paws, my pawns. Unseen, you will everywhere destroy where I command you to destroy, consume where I command you to consume. The powers will protect you from poison, from predators, from trap and talon, while you are about my business. And in the end, all who live in this land of Flanders will fear the hidden plague in the night, and they, too, will do my bidding, in exchange for shelter from your teeth, your claws, your very droppings."

"We will not do your bidding," whispered Elisabeth.

"The powers say otherwise, now that you have released them."

"I will shut the gate," Elisabeth said again.

"Try," said the crooked mouse, and vanished into the long grass.

***

Bébécamoul, the river monster of Lille, turned its fearsome, red-snouted head from side to side, and sniffed the morning air. Its nostrils quivered, then flared in a snarl of distaste: the air was fouled. Bébécamoul could not sleep now, and shifted restlessly where it lay.

And in Arleux, the bunch of garlic in enormous Henriette's hand rustled and swayed as she stretched out her arms and yawned. She stopped abruptly, and stared up through the cellar window. Shadows that were nothing at all like clouds ran across the sky, almost too faint to see in the day's first light. But she did see them, and her massive face frowned.

***

Elisabeth began to walk, hardly caring in what direction. Her mask snagged on brambles and twigs; she had forgotten she was wearing it. She started to tear it off, but paused. She'd seen how the few mice out foraging to feed hungry and terrified families shrank from her and bolted into their burrows. Better she hide her face.

The air was heavy with the scent and sound of the powers. They smelled to her like the grey vapours from the cars that rumbled across the fields on the hard, black roads, only no breeze from the sea could sweep away the stink. They sounded like the painful, scraping

clang of church bells, only the sound never died away to blessed quiet. Across the breadth of Flanders, the small folk cowered, silent and cold, in their burrows.

Not long after noon, Elisabeth heard steps to one side of her, only just close enough to notice. She moved faster, sick with shame at the thought of meeting another mouse. The steps kept pace. She slowed, but again, whoever it was matched her speed.

The steps began to come more quickly, and she knew that in a moment the mouse would be upon her. Come to take vengeance? To rid mousekind of her? If she were to die, it would only be just. But she would never be able to make things right, or even try. That was a pity.

The stalks of grass parted. It was the mouse who had danced alone. He had taken his mask off, but she knew him by the way he moved, by his scent.

She turned away.

"Wait," he said.

She stopped. Even without the mask, he was so beautiful, so lonely.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"To shut the gate, monsieur." When he said nothing, she added, as if he should have known, "To keep the powers in." Still he said nothing. "I don't know which way to go." Silence. "Do you?"

At last he spoke. "I know where the gate is, but not how to shut it. And I am afraid."

"Please, take me there, monsieur."

"Augustin. Not monsieur."

Last night, as she'd waited in the brambles, it had been the dream of her life to speak with him like this. Now, it only reminded her of what she'd done, what

she'd lost. "Please—may we go?"

He started off, and she followed him.

The moon was rising again when they stopped.

"Here?"

"Nearby."

Elisabeth would have thought it would feel different near the gate. But they could be anywhere in Flanders on any moonlit night. This Augustin could have led her anywhere, led her far from the gate. He was in league with the old mouse who had cut her paw! She felt an overwhelming urge to strike him, tear him, bite him, so that he would know her rage. She lunged.

"No!" he cried. He pushed her away again and again. "No! They know we're here! You are doing their bidding!"

She stopped as if he'd suddenly drenched her with icy water. And yet.... "How, then, do you know where the gate is?"

Augustin whispered, "I'm sorry."

"He knows because he is my son," said the crooked mouse, suddenly at his side. "And I am very displeased with him, for, indeed, he was to lead you far from here. I will not shield him from the powers now."

Augustin trembled violently, but Elisabeth could not detect the scent of fear. "I do not know how to return the powers and shut the gate," he said, ignoring his mother. "But at least I could do this much, even if we both die for it."

"As you *will,*" snapped the crooked mouse. A foul, stinging wind began to blow.

***

Jean le Bûcheron settled his winged helmet on his head and gave his axe an experimental swing. It crashed through the corrugated steel wall of the shed, and he grimaced guiltily. It had been many years since the giants of Flanders had been awakened, and it gave le Bûcheron an itchy, eager feeling.

He used the axe to open the side of the shed and strode out into the night. In the fields outside Steenvorde, he halted. The wings on his helmet caught the moonlight as he turned his head from side to side and listened.

***

"How can you kill your own son?" said Elisabeth, coughing as her lungs filled with the burning air.

"I am not her son!" said Augustin.

The crooked mouse laughed. "You can say that as often as you like. Your very treachery proves you are my own child—I was a fool to rely on you, and a bigger fool to give birth to you at all.

"I, too," she continued, turning to Elisabeth with a contemptuous toss of her head on her twisted neck, "had my moonlit night of dancing and distraction, and married and bore my children. The mate, the babies, each one torn from me by disease and famine and tooth and beak. As they died, one by one, the remaining ones grew to fear me as I took up my mighty purpose, and ran far from my protection. Only this one is left, the last and least of them."

"I did what you required," he cried wretchedly. "I kindled the desire that opened the gate. But I did not know—" He glanced at Elisabeth and hung his head.

The crooked mouse sneered. "My son, what makes your own crude desires noble and good, and mine evil? Every creature on this earth wants only what it wants for itself. There is no nobility, no goodness."

Even without nobility or goodness, still I must do this thing, Elisabeth thought dully. *But what must I do? Looking inward drove me to disaster. So I will look outward.*

Expecting nothing, feeling nothing, she reached out and listened past the ceaseless clanging. She breathed past the noisome air. She cast her heart outward, outward, asking: *What must I do?*

And the answer came: *You must call us,* said three hundred silent voices. The voices of the giants of Flanders.

Elisabeth began to call them. "Come to me, giants of Flanders, ageless defenders! Come to me! Destroy the powers! Shut the gates!" Her voice, shrill and desperate, cut through the evil clamour of the powers and carried to every corner of the flat land. Her paw twitched in agony, a new and more horrible stab of pain with each word.

The crooked mouse said, "Stories for babies."

Augustin moved to stand next to Elisabeth. "Can you hear them?"

Elisabeth listened, trying to hear through the din of the powers. She shook her head. "They are not coming."

"Please," Augustin begged. "Call them again."

Elisabeth started to shake her head again, then saw the crooked mouse, smiling as she had at the dance.

Perhaps I am small, weak, and ignorant, thought Elisabeth in a sudden flash of fury. *But I cannot bear that smile.* She drew breath to call, and braced herself

for the pain she knew would come again.

The crooked mouse took a needle-sharp splinter of wood from the ground. She drove it heedlessly into her own paw and withdrew it, then raised the paw high. Blood flowed through her fingers and down her arm. "Powers! It is beginning!"

In a burst of renewed pain, the cut on Elisabeth's paw split and gushed. Elisabeth's blood dripped into the heavy soil at her feet. *I am bound by blood to this evil thing,* thought Elisabeth. *At least I can make sure she finds me a very troubling companion.*

"Giants!" she called. "Boureima. Gargantua. Belle Hélène. Fils Aymon. Valentin. Sylvestre. Reine Brunehaut. Gayantin and Gayantine. Jean le Bûcheron. Bébécamoul. Henriette. Phinaert." On and on she called, name after name, locked for an eternity in a single moment of agony and hope.

"The giants!" screamed Augustin. "They're here!"

Elisabeth could not hear the giants over the horrible sound of the powers. But she could feel the ground tremble, she could smell the scent of wood and wire and dust that clung to them. And, finally, she saw them.

Sylvestre le ménestrel, with his wild jester's cap and lute, played music that brought giant steps together into a thundering march. The stately Reine Brunehaut gazed ahead as she approached, her face serene and confident. Phinaert swung his barbarian's axe, the movement making the glassy-eyed wolves' heads on his coat of pelts knock against his shoulders. Jovial Gargantua, ever hungry, came riding on a horse-drawn cart, one hand controlling the reins as the other held a gigantic chicken leg at which he tore with gusto.

On they came in their hundreds, all different, and

as big as the sky to a mouse. But around and above each of them, like a cloak, loomed even taller a glowing figure of strength and joyfulness. Elisabeth gasped, and thought once more, *What have I done?*

"You have done me another favour," cackled the crooked mouse, as if Elisabeth had spoken aloud. Her voice rose: "Powers, I exhort you! This is your time to kill them all!"

Elisabeth watched, her heart pounding, as the darkness billowed and heaved, and the hideous clanging rose until it was more like blows than sound. The powers gathered themselves to crush the giants, the last hope of Flanders. They made a wall that began to constrict, forcing the giants inward and downward to smallness and death.

Augustin's body convulsed. "The keystone!" he cried. He bounded up and up the brown Franciscan robes of the giant Guillaume de Rubrouk and leapt out to dash himself against the wall. A moment later, Augustin was nowhere at all, and the wall had a crack in it, blacker than the night.

The giants rushed to widen the fault in the wall that Augustin had forced. They seized stones with hands and swords and axes and paws and fins. Their glowing selves flared still brighter as they worked, and the stones hissed and shattered.

The fragments whirled in stinging tornadoes that cut the flesh from Elisabeth's body, but she had more important things to think about. Augustin had shown her: the only thing that could fight the powers was life. She was pouring her life out to the giants, she could feel it. So strange it was that her small life could be so great a gateway—first, unwittingly, to give passage the

powers, and now, with all her heart, to give life to the giants.

The crooked mouse, too, was being flayed by the whirling shards of the shattered wall. Her body, smaller and much more wizened, could not withstand as much as Elisabeth's, and soon her wailing ceased. With her death, the powers scattered, becoming clots of darkness that darted or oozed, each pursued by a giant across the fields and back into their own dreadful place.

Soon Elisabeth was alone, and the night was utterly silent, or else she was deaf. What was left of her tiny body lay quivering on the grass. The last thing she saw was the moon, one night past the full.

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In a village not far from Cassel, a dozen people sat drinking beer or hot chocolate, and argued about their new giant. What should it be? Hunter? Baker? Queen? Dragon? Knight?

"A mouse," said someone.

"A giant mouse!" Laughter all around.

"Even a giant mouse is not very big."

"Two mice, then!"

"All right, what shall we call them?"

"Elisabeth!"

"Augustin!"

"I know—give them masks, as if they're going to a ball. They can dance together in the processions!"

The next day, the people of the village began to build their giants. And in the burrows and fields, the smaller creatures began to tell the story of the giant mice of Flanders.