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A Spell for
Susannah's Mother
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The back of the King's tawny fur coat disappeared around the corner, and the Queen maneuvered herself out from behind the flower seller's cart before she lost sight of the sneaky bastard who called himself her husband.

The saleslady shot her a knowing look and selected a posy of small purple blooms, a Kingdom Foresta specialty in this cold, wintery season. "Might I interest you in Heartsease?"

"Thank you, no. I'm in a rush." Normally the Queen would converse with the citizens, but right now she was both angry and incognito. Her lower back ached, and dirty road sludge weighed down her nondescript cloak and gown at the hem.

"I would be in a rush, too, were my babe due any day," the seller observed. "Luck to you, madam."

The Queen tugged her hood closer to her face and hurried past, her fury increasing with every cold, miserable plodding step. Wind gusted down the streets of the capitol city as if blown by giants, funneled by the tall buildings on either side. Wintertide was a day away and the Wintereve Feast tonight. By all rights she and her husband should be warm and safe at the castle's hearth, toasting one another with mulled cider, stringing cranberries and awaiting the birth of their third child.

Due any day, indeed! The Queen was far too pregnant and exhausted to be trailing Reginald as he skulked toward his latest assignation. Her feet had bloated over the tops of her winter boots. False contractions hardened her womb so frequently it stole her breath. Yet here she was, lumbering along as quickly as she could, because there was no one on her staff she could trust with such a delicate mission. Not even the nurse, home with Princesses Susannah and Calypso. Instead of enlisting Nursie's help, she'd told the older woman she had to purchase last minute Wintertide gifts, and Nursie had threatened to call the court healer to prevent the Queen from going.

But she was the Queen of Foresta, the pregnant Queen of Foresta, the pregnant and cranky Queen of Foresta, and by the Dragon, her will would be done.

Her will would be done by everyone except her sneaking, cheating skunk of a husband.

The Queen reached the corner of Flower Street to see Reginald whip into the little alleyway where she'd nearly caught him the first time. Her heart lurched at the sight of him, and she resisted the urge to call out. To beg him to stop whatever he was doing, whoever he was seeing, and come home with her. Instead she waddled down the sidewalk, her huge abdomen earning her more space as men and women made room for the pregnant lady with the scowl.

At least Foresta was a polite kingdom. If anyone had given her trouble on one of her unhappy scouting missions, she might have had to retract the law currently in place that forbade putting criminals, or people who annoyed the King and Queen, to death.

Yet once again, when she reached the alley, there was no sign of the man.

Damn and blast. Where could he be going? The narrow passage led straight to Sundry Street with no detours, no doors, no ladders. Not even any garbage. The cleanest alley in all of Kingdom Foresta, and her husband managed to hide in it.

Next time, she would bring the magic sniffing pig, if she could coax the animal out into nasty weather like this. Not as inconspicuous, alas, but more effective than her human eyes.

The Queen squeezed between the buildings, the press of bricks on her body icy through her warm woolen cloak. She inspected every brick, every cobblestone, desperate for an explanation. She longed to put an end to the King's deception, but she was not a woman to accuse without proof. Seeing him disappear in an alley wasn't enough.

But she would find evidence. And once she had it, she would wield it like a rapier.

She was damned good with a rapier.

Disappointed and tired, she exited the other side and stared up and down Sundry, searching amidst all the last-minute shoppers for her husband's glossy brown head and confident stride. His broad shoulders. His strong arms and manly chest. Most of all, his rascally smile—the one that had seduced her seven years ago, when she'd been a mere baron's daughter and he'd been the most eligible bachelor in many kingdoms.

So what if one of his birthing gifts was that he was destined to love thirteen women before his fiftieth year? They'd both been confident she would be his one and only, that the gift was somehow a trick.

She'd been a fool. Fairy birthing gifts always came true. Always.

Had Reginald grown tired of married life? Of her? Their marriage bed had been warm but celibate with her advanced pregnancy. Or had the growing unrest in the Middle Kingdoms due to the curse placed on it by the fairy Malady caused Reginald to seek a diversion? From his secretive behavior, the disappearing gold from the castle accounts, the strange way he'd begun to treat her, the Queen was convinced Reginald had moved on to his next lady love.

Her only consolation was that whoever this woman was, she too would be left behind when Reginald met lady number three.

At least she, his Queen, would be his first love, his wife and the mother of his daughters. All daughters. Only daughters. For the Female Curse meant no boy children would be born to any nobles in the Middle Kingdoms forever more. And it was all her fault.

Of course, none of this mattered at the moment, because as she warmed herself in the Dandy Fairy Pawn Shop, considering the gift of a magic flute for her daughters, the Queen's first real contraction hit her like a horse's hoof. Wetness trickled hotly between her legs.

The Queen, gritting her teeth against the pain, shed her anonymity and used her status to obtain the fastest conveyance available. The driver said nothing about the fact his Queen was unescorted in town and hugely pregnant; she'd earned a reputation for eccentricity since

marrying their King. Unlike most ladies of the nobility, she dirtied her hands with castle tasks and planned to educate her daughters to do the same.

Of course, she didn't tell the driver she was in labor either. That delightful fillip would be in all the broadsheets and gossip rags soon enough.

"Pay this man well," she said to the steward when she alighted at the castle gates. "The babe comes, yet I am here in good time."

The steward and driver blanched in tandem. Her anxious staff exploded in a flurry of activity. Bells began to toll, and a flock of messengers were sent in search of the absent King, believed to be, like she'd claimed to be, shopping for last minute gifts in town.

She wished them better luck than she had had.

When the guards insisted on carrying her to her chamber, the Queen didn't argue. Her legs had grown numb and her skirts wet, yet not once did the nervous men flinch away.

She only wished her womb were numb, but instead it twisted and throbbed as the babe readied herself. A pain shot through the Queen's lower back, sharper than the rest, and her throat tightened with woe. Would this babe ever know a happy family or had her husband doomed them all to dysfunction?

Nursie jerked open the chamber door and immediately began scolding. "I told you not to go out in this weather. I told you you'd bought enough gifts. I told you the court healer wouldn't let you go."

Nursie's voice faded into a buzz of annoyance as the Queen's watery gaze fell on her two young daughters, seated on the edge of a divan, their eyes wide with concern. The guards set her carefully on her feet and scurried off to tend to other duties.

"Hello, darlings," she managed between pants. "Mama is going to have your baby sister tonight."

"Papa says we're to have a baby brother." Susannah's unruly, dark hair did not suit her serious nature. She already showed signs of one of her happier christening gifts—canniness. "I helped him break the Female Curse last week."

The Queen sighed. They'd tried to protect her, but Susannah had somehow concluded the Middle Kingdoms were in trouble because of her. Probably learned it from her father, who loved to lecture his daughters, though they were but five and three. Little ones could not be expected to realize when their Papa was sadly mistaken—or straying from the bosom of his family.

"Your Papa tells a lot of fine tales." Including the one about how he would love his wife, and only his wife, forever.

After Nursie rang for a maid, the Queen allowed the older woman to help her out of her clothing. The princesses would be separated from her for most of the birthing process, and she wanted to assure them everything would be all right.

"Are you excited to meet the baby?" she asked as they hovered nearby. "I know I am. What color hair do you think she'll have?"

Calypso's hair was as red as her grandfather's had been. She sniffled and threw herself at her mother. Nursie caught her before she could latch onto the Queen's wet, dirty skirts. "Mama, Mama! Will you die when the baby comes out?" she wailed.

"Of course not. Women's bodies are made to have babies." The Queen finished shedding her skirts and held out her arms. Calypso ran into them for a hug, joined by Susannah. "Our fairy healer will be with me every moment."

"Will Suze and I have babies?" Calypso asked.

"Only when you are much older." She kissed the children's cheeks and smiled tightly as a purple-frocked maid burst through the chamber door. "Go with Ginny. Mama needs to rest."

Reassured, her daughters left with the maid, with the promise they could play "Who Shall Be Queen?" on the thrones in the receiving room.

"I told you not to go shopping," Nursie nagged her again as soon as they were alone. "You don't have to do everything yourself anymore. You are the Queen. You have servants."

"I like to do things myself." She breathed deeply as another pain hit her. This babe was coming fast, and all the stalking she'd done today had doubtless accelerated matters.

Another ill to lay at her husband's door, should he ever deign to walk through it.

"This is what happens when you do too much." Nursie bagged the Queen's soiled garments and helped her into soft, absorbent pantaloons, pantaloons she wished she'd worn today before haring off on her angry mission. "I hope you weren't anywhere near a stables when your pains began. The babe will look like a horse."

"I don't believe in superstition," the Queen gritted out.

Nursie snorted. "It's not superstition if it's magic. Will it be a bath or the birthing chair?"

"Just the chair, I think. I may be too far gone." The Queen, in a clean pink nightgown, paced to the window that overlooked the courtyard. She stared through grey skies toward the city, where her husband even now might be bedding his new lady. Frolicking, lovemaking, while his wife endured labor pangs with a side dish of heartbreak. "Ring and see if he has returned."

"He hasn't, or he'd be here." Nursie clutched the Queen's hands as another pain nearly doubled her. "I'm sure he planned to be back before the feast."

"That might be too late." The feast was not due to begin for several hours. "Have them send out location spells, Nursie."

Damn Reginald for putting her in this position. She didn't want the staff to know there were problems with the royal couple. The kingdom was in enough of an uproar as the fall-out from the Female Curse trickled down. They owed it to their citizens to present a calm and competent

face to the world. It was their job. Their duty. Just as it was her duty to endure, somehow, her husband's christening gift and its consequences.

She had known he was to love thirteen women when she married him. Was it his fault that he merely bowed to his fate? Perhaps not. But he should fight it. He should have found a way. For her. For their children. For Foresta.

Why the fairies claimed the gifts were always for the best, she had no idea. And that was why, when Malady placed a nasty christening curse on baby Susannah, the Queen had pressured the King, who had pressured the Emperor to ban Malady from the human lands. The other twelve kings had been eager to join in, for Malady had long been a pestilence. In fact, shortly before Susannah had been born, Malady had treated the Emperor's new son to body odor, of all things. It was ridiculous to claim body odor would ever help the poor boy in the future.

As with so many things with the fairies, Malady had had the last laugh. She'd finished her curse before the Emperor had ratified the ban, and the nobility had experienced five years of female babies. So far. Some attempted trickery—amulets, rituals, passing commoners' boy children off as theirs—but the Female Curse had held true.

The Queen rested her flushed cheek against the window, the double paned glass the only thing between her and the snow that had begun to fall. The fine, powdery flakes sparkled when light hit them. Another contraction preceded another trickle of hot liquid between her legs. And she felt the urge to push begin to build inside her like rage.

Where was he? How could he leave her?

"Nursie," she said, her heart resigned, "The babe will wait no longer. She's impatient."

"And he is not here." Nursie *tsked*. "I will shake a knot in that boy's tail, I will."

"He is your King, not your charge." The Queen grunted as a second pain struck her, and her belly hardened like iron.

"I nursed him with his dear mother passed. I changed his diapers and taught him to piddle in the potty. I stood beside him when he was crowned, and I helped him find the perfect Queen. Believe me when I say I can and will shake a knot in his tail."

Everything Nursie said was true, but not even she could thwart a christening curse. Thirteen women would he love. The Queen supposed she should be thankful she'd had several years of devotion before his curse engulfed him.

But oh, how she loved him. Her heart beat only for him, her children and her duty to her kingdom. He claimed to love her as well, and until last month, she'd believed it.

Even though the Middle Kingdoms were in turmoil, even though the patriarchal structure might one day crumble when there were no male nobles to inherit, the Queen once again was suffused by a vicious satisfaction that Malady had been banned. That she, the Queen of the smallest of all the Middle Kingdoms, working within the patriarchal system that frustrated her, had shaped this thing. And that it was worth it.

But then waves of serious labor crashed into her, and she could think of nothing but the hard road that lay ahead, the road she was to walk without her husband at her side.

The King was feeling munificent after the success of his liaison and inspected the merchandise of the Dandy Fairy Pawn Shop before heading home. Wintertide was tomorrow, and if there was one thing he loved, it was the excitement on the faces of his ladies, both big and small, when they opened their gifts under the evergreen tree.

To tell the truth, there were many things the King loved, but bringing joy to women was one of his chief pleasures.

Yet to his surprise, the proprietor, who'd been so helpful until now, tried to talk him out of the dainty magic flute.

"The princesses already have one," said the old man, who looked human but wasn't. "Your wife bought one today."

"Don't be ridiculous." Reginald laughed at the thought of his wife doing anything as unwise as traipsing about town so close to her confinement. Of the two of them, he was by far the more foolish one, and he was not known for poor choices. The broadsheets had begun to refer to him King Reginald the Just, for the growing accomplishments of his Justice Chambers.

This meant his lovely wife was never wrong. It was sometimes annoying, but that was the way of it.

And then he realized the fairy must have recognized him, even in his huntsman disguise. All this time, and the old fellow had known who he was?

Interesting. And a bit unsettling.

Before he could question the proprietor, a marble of light pinged through the door and zipped up to the King. It began to whistle. The fairy slapped it out of the air.

"Location spell, cued to you. We can't have them finding you in my shop with the necklace in your possession." The oldster jabbed a wand Reginald hadn't seen him grab, and the secret door cracked open behind the counter. "Quick, hide in the back room."

Before Reginald could leap over the counter, the location spell was followed by a castle guard. Instead of attacking anyone, the young man screeched something frantic about the Queen.

Reginald felt his heart stop in his chest before it increased to double time. "What about my wife?"

"Your Highness, you're needed at the castle. The babe comes," the young man gasped out.

The old fairy slammed the hidden door and swiped his mouth with a hand that shook slightly. "Jumpfrogs, I thought it was the FAE for sure." He bagged the flute for the King. "Take it. In fact, take two. You'll need multiples."

"Thank you." Reginald accepted the sack and patted the treasure in his coat pocket. The excitement and tension that presided over a birthing begin to energize him. A baby. Another precious baby, and this one an unusually special child.

"Best hurry," the old fairy said. "The timing is crucial."

"Wish me luck," he replied, although he was confident he didn't need it.

For the King had a secret, a secret he hadn't told anyone, not even his wife. All right, perhaps he'd discussed it in general terms with his eldest daughter, but Susannah was five. She couldn't possibly understand the ramifications of what he'd done. He just loved the way her forehead scrunched up when she concentrated, the solemn questions she asked as she considered everything he said.

Just like her mother. Susannah was going to make somebody a heck of a Queen some day. Too bad it wouldn't be his kingdom, because his son would inherit that.

"Off with his head!" screeched the laboring Queen when her errant husband finally showed his face in the birthing chamber.

She would have grabbed her rapier and chopped his fake smile and big fuzzy head off herself if another contraction hadn't hit her the moment she tried to stand.

"I want the pain spell," she snarled at the slender court healer in his plain, red tunic and trousers. "Now."

"It's too soon. It will slow your labor." The healer eased her back into the padded birthing chair, Nursie clucking and smoothing the strands of blonde hair that had come loose from the Queen's tight queue. "I must warn you, emotional upset will also make the birthing more difficult."

"Tell that to him." The Queen groaned and pointed a trembling finger at the King, who had the good grace to look ashamed of his tardiness. Not to mention the fact he had been tugging some other woman instead of holding his wife's hand and bathing her brow. Reginald hadn't left her side for one minute during the first two princesses' births, and the Queen felt betrayed for many reasons.

So many, many reasons.

"My dear," her husband said hesitantly, "I have a gift for you."

"I've got something for you, too," the Queen snapped at him when she could vocalize without screaming. She shoved her heels into the stirrups of the chair and straightened, her hands gripping the blue linen that modestly covered her belly and thighs. "Come over here and get it."

If she pulled hard enough, she could rip the linen. She was sure of it. She'd seen Nursie make bandages out of it for the stillroom. Then she could strangle him with the rope.

“Er.” The King retrieved something small from his waistcoat pocket. “Is it bigger than a breadbox?”

“This is not funny, Reginald.” The Queen shoved aside the cool rag Nursie was using to wipe her forehead. “I’ve been here alone for hours and hours. And the healer won’t give me the pain spell.”

“You’re not alone,” the healer pointed out, the bright fairy lights in the birthing chamber gleaming off his bald, brown pate. “We would never leave you alone. And you’re not ready for the pain spell. You’ll need it later.”

She ignored the one man to focus on the other. “Reginald, where have you been? You almost missed the baby’s crowning.”

His eyes widened, and he paled. “We’re that close? You aren’t just angry at me?”

“Yes, we’re that close, you bastard.”

“But the girls took hours.”

“This one’s different.” Of course he hadn’t answered her question. He would never confess his sins in front of Nursie, the healer, the assistant healer, the assistant Nursie and everyone else in the birthing room at the current time.

He might not even confess them to her. That was why she needed proof, so he could then be punished. With rapiers. Wielded by her. Reginald the Just would meet *her* justice.

“My dear, this isn’t like you.” He hurried to her side.

“And it isn’t like you to—” she began, but stopped herself before she slipped. She had no verification other than her gut and his curse. Until now, it wasn’t like her husband to cheat on his wife.

Except that it was, twelve times over, as decreed by that bitch Malady at his birth.

The Queen would have directed her wrath at the fairies, except that the kindly court healer attended the birthing. Thanks to him, the process would be less painful and onerous. Or it would be when he cast her pain spell. Moreover, it was tradition for a fairy healer to enact a noble child’s naming ceremony at the proper moment so the Fairy Alliance for Ethics representatives could prepare their dubious christening gifts.

The Queen could have done without those gifts, but that was a battle she was not yet ready to tackle.

And so, she would curse her husband now, the fairies later. At least the current crop of FAE representatives never handed out body odor or unfaithfulness to one’s lawfully wedded wife.

The King began to massage her tense shoulders, his big, strong hands working out the kinks. She didn’t want him touching her, but his presence soothed her in a way the healer and Nursie could not. She inhaled as pain struck, fully expecting to detect the scent of another

woman's perfume on his treacherous fingers, but instead all she smelled was herbs, blood and...was that dirt?

Her husband smelled of newly turned earth?

In the middle of Wintertide season?

Perhaps because he'd been plowing some other furrow.

The Queen nipped at her husband's hand, but her sharp teeth missed their target. Agony danced through her pelvis and the small of her back as the babe dropped lower. The Queen let out a cry and dove for her husband's arms. He held her tightly, murmuring words of comfort and love in her ears.

For the moment, she chose to believe them. It helped to pretend, and if she concentrated, his arms felt as safe as ever.

"Here comes another one," she said. Her stomach constricted, and her womb tried to turn itself inside out.

Reginald released her, and the Queen whimpered a protest. But pain crested and the need to push became urgent. She howled and panted. The court healer coached her breathing. Nursie held her hand. The assistant healer and assistant Nursie hovered with clean cloths, blankets and water.

And the King? He fumbled at her neck, placing some sort of cord around it. Did he plan to strangle her at her most vulnerable so he could marry his next great love?

When her longest, most painful contraction yet drew to a close, the Queen sensed it wouldn't be much longer. One or two more pushes, and the babe would arrive in half the time of her sisters.

"I will now cast the pain spell." The healer waved a tiny wand over the Queen's mounded stomach. Sparkles drifted over her like snow, snow from a Wintertide sky, only they spread a warm glow throughout her body, softening and relaxing her for the final endeavor.

"Thank the Dragon," the Queen said with a sigh. Released temporarily from her pain, she drooped in her husband's muscular arms, let his touch appease her and her consciousness drift. She had attempted to discuss baby names with the King last month before his suspicious behavior had started, and he'd suggested Hortense. But the Queen now pictured a different child. She imagined a beautiful girl, an elegant girl, a girl whose long black hair was the color of ebony, her skin the pure white of snow. Her lips as pink as roses.

Roses. She'd always wanted a child named for roses.

The Queen became aware of a musty odor tickling her nostrils. Definitely not roses. She glanced down. A small object that looked exactly like a wizened human finger lay between her milk-heavy breasts.

"What the fook," asked the Queen, her voice a rusty croak she hardly recognized, "is that?"

"A birthing charm." The King tightened the cord behind her neck, drawing the mangled pendant closer to the Queen's face. It left a faint smear of brown on her sweaty pink nightrail. He rose from the special seat behind her birthing chair and wrapped his arms around her, cupping the item with his free hand.

"My Queen, you, and the Middle Kingdoms, will be thanking me soon," he whispered. "You have no idea what I have gone through to obtain this for us. Don't let the healer see it."

The Queen tried to inspect the hideous object, but his hand concealed it. She didn't like the tone of his voice, its note of braggadocio. She didn't like his smelly gift. She supposed his other lover was the one who would now receive the rubies, the candies, the flowers, while she would receive dead things.

She drew his head to her lips, but instead of kissing him, she hissed, "Who is she?"

"Who is who?"

"The other woman." The Queen dug her fingers into his thick hair, and he winced. "The one you've been seeing in town. Your next great love."

"What are you talking about?"

"I followed you."

"You were in town today?" The King's hand grasped hers and attempted to preserve his scalp. She felt a dull heaviness increase in her loins, and she breathed deeply to postpone the next contraction. *Not now, my child. Wait one more moment. I need to murder your father.*

"You will leave her, too, for number three." Tears filled the Queen's eyes, and she could barely make out her husband's handsome visage. This last month had turned her into a regular waterspout. "But I'm your Queen and you will not put me and your children aside!"

"I haven't left you. I love you." Reginald cupped her face in his smelly hands. "You and only you. How could I love another, when I have you? There will not be thirteen women for me, now or ever."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She wanted to believe. She wanted to believe him desperately. "The fairies are never wrong. And I followed you."

Reginald's firm, soft lips brushed her own, and in a voice so quiet she could barely hear him, he said, "I may have had dealings with...ah...a representative of the fairy black market this afternoon. The charm had to be properly timed to your pregnancy in order to work. I could get it no earlier than Wintertide Eve. I am truly sorry I was late."

"A charm?" The Queen felt hope leap in her breast like the baby leapt in her womb, ready for release. "You were seeking a charm this afternoon?"

"The charm will—," the King began, but the healer clapped, which made a great deal more noise than might be expected from such thin hands.

"Your Highnesses, the babe is ready," he commanded. "It is time."

“Not yet!” the Queen yelled. She wanted more answers from her husband before it was too late.

Nursie smacked the King in the back of the head. “Sit your bottom down, sirrah, and help your wife focus. Do you want to suffocate the poor child? She’s ready to be born.”

The King sank abruptly into his spot and grasped the Queen’s shoulders. He twitched the pendant around so it was behind her head. “I’m ready to meet my so—, I mean, my child. Darling, are you ready?”

“Fine. I’m ready,” the Queen said. Braced by her man, who might still be worthy of the title husband, she began to push her third child into the world.

Because of the efficacy of the healer’s spell, the Queen felt mostly pressure and discomfort as the babe crowned. She panted and struggled, with the King and Nursie urging and encouraging her, cheering her on. Soon the fifth member of the royal family of Foresta slipped easily, as these things go, into the waiting arms of the court healer. The healer and assistant checked the child quickly before wrapping it in a clean towel to be introduced to the parents.

“Hurry up. I want my baby,” the Queen croaked. Her arms ached to hold the child.

“Your baby is healthy.” The healer smiled at her and raised his wand for the next part of the process.

“Child of King Reginald and Queen Matilda of Foresta, I dub thee—” He paused for the Queen to supply the child’s name. Magic tingled in the air as the naming spell waited to take effect.

The Queen opened her mouth to speak, but the King, in great excitement, leapt to his feet. The pendant heated, singeing her neck, as her husband blared out, “We shall call him Peter!”

Latching onto the name, magic sizzled across the Queen’s skin, then the King’s, before it centered on their new baby, who began to cry. The child had a thin, wobbly wail that grew stronger and stronger as the lungs grew accustomed to sucking air in and out.

For a long moment, the babe’s wails were the only sound in the birthing chamber.

The sear of the pendant and prickle of the naming spell disappeared before they became excruciating. Tears glinted in the King’s eyes, and the Queen pressed a shaking hand to her mouth. Nursie, beside them, muffled a gasp as well.

A boy? This birthing charm the King had procured...had it broken the Female Curse? It must have done something, else why would it have burned her skin?

Her husband slid one arm around her and held out the other. “My wife and I would like to hold our son please.”

It would be only fitting if the two of them broke the curse when they had essentially been the ones to cause it, the Queen thought. She touched the skin beneath the pendant and found it tender, almost sore.

The healer frowned and cradled the baby to his chest. "What is hanging around the Queen's neck?"

"Does it matter?" The King rose to his full height and towered over the smaller man. "The deed is done, sir. Introduce us to our son."

"I cannot do that." The healer shook his bald, brown head with what seemed like genuine regret. "But I can introduce you to your daughter, whose name shall be Peter, from now until the end of recorded time."

"Daughter? But the fairy said the charm would work." The King untied the smelly pendant from the Queen's neck and shook it. "Do you know how much I paid for this ugly thing? You must be wrong. The babe in your arms is a boy."

The healer narrowed his eyes at the King and the object in his hand. "Really, King Reginald. The fairy black market? What would your constituents say?"

"They would have said, 'Thank you very much, King Reginald.', if the damned pendant had worked the way it was supposed to," he growled. "You're sure we had another girl?"

The baby cried louder, as if sensing the displeasure of her father turned against her already.

"I'm sure," the healer said.

"If they won't take the child, give her to me." Nursie held out her arms, and the healer slipped the tiny, crying blue bundle into them. "There, there precious. Your Papa is just joshing. He loves his girls, all of them. He's happy you're here."

"Let me see her," the Queen said. She'd expected a girl and wasn't the slightest bit disappointed to have one. "Let me hold my baby."

Nursie rushed to her side and placed the red-faced child into her arms. At once, the child ceased crying. Queen Matilda met her daughter's gaze. Her eyes were dark, alert and seeking. Queen and princess inspected one another's faces. The babe's hair was not black as ebony, and her skin was red and wrinkled and moist, not white as snow.

Yet her toothless gums were pink as roses, and the Queen knew with one glance beauty would come. One day, this child would steal hearts—as she had already stolen the Queen's.

"Look at our beautiful daughter." For the fiftieth time today, tears welled up in the Queen's eyes. "Look, Reginald. Look."

With a disappointed grunt, the King leaned over her shoulder and peered into his daughter's round, red face. The Queen tore her gaze from the beloved new face to watch as the King's glower melted in a wash of paternal adoration.

Now King and princess inspected one another's faces, and it was, as always, love at first sight.

"She's perfect," Reginald admitted. "Peter is absolutely perfect."

The next day during the Wintertide gifting, the Queen nursed her new daughter in a comfortable lounger by the tree and watched the older girls play bronco on the floor with their father. All the toys under the tree, including three magic flutes, and they preferred to ride on their father's back as he galloped madly around the thickly carpeted room.

Which was exactly as it should be.

Without ceremony, Foresta's FAE representatives—the fairies Budbud, Pleasentia and Gary—popped like soap bubbles into the center of the room. The Queen had been expecting them since the moment Peter's naming ceremony had concluded, but as always she felt some degree of apprehension at their arrival.

Who knew what trouble the fairies would bring? She was certain, even if they didn't wish to harm humankind, that they wished humans no good either.

Calypso had no such reservations. She squealed and pelted toward them at a dead run. Susannah approached with a more mannerly pace. The King straightened his royal pajamas and ruffled hair.

"Did someone say there was baby in need of christening?" Budbud, who'd been old and cranky as long as the Queen had known her, had an almost cheery look this morning. A ribbon of Wintertide white strung with bells danced around her shoulders.

"There is indeed." The King rose from the floor and gestured grandly toward the Queen. "There she is with her mother. Princess Peter of Foresta. There is nothing you can give her that will make her any more perfect than she already is."

"Then perhaps," Budbud said with a glint in her eyes, "it's our job to make sure she isn't too perfect."

"You shan't give her anything like what I got, will you?" Susannah asked the elderly fairy. "My presents weren't that nice."

"Gary, Gary, Gary, Gary!" Calypso chanted, hanging off the male fairy's robes like a monkey. Pleasentia, a younger female fairy, smiled at the King and wiggled her fingers.

"We'll give her exactly what she needs," Budbud assured the royal family. "And we will also give you a few words of wisdom. Peter is not number three. She is number four."

"But what does that mean?" the Queen asked. Sometimes she wished humans had never begun dealing with fairies. They were often more trouble than the magic was worth.

"Think about it." Budbud slipped her wand out of a concealed pocket and gestured toward the new baby. "But think about it later. Right now, I want to meet Princess Peter."

They had no idea how important their children would be in the future, Buddud reflected as she watched the royal family gather around their new baby. Tiny Kingdom Foresta, with its flowers and its forests. Nobody would look to Foresta for change, which is why it was perfect.

That's also why she'd given the Queen a hint about Peter being Reginald's fourth great love. She couldn't have Matilda kicking the man out of her bed for imagined slights. He had a lot of work to do there over the next two decades, and any estrangement between the royal couple didn't fit with the fairies' plans.

It didn't fit with them at all.

If she and Mali had to help them out a little along the way—a tweak here, some interesting reading material there—it was for their own good.

And the good of all humans in the Middle Kingdoms.

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Jody Wallace grew up in the South in a very rural area. She went to school a long time because she couldn't find a decent job and ended up with a Master's Degree in Creative Writing. In addition to author, her resume includes English teacher, technical documents editor, market analyst, wife & mother, web designer, and general all around pain in the butt. She is currently published in romance fiction under the names Jody Wallace and Ellie Marvel. She has always lived with cats, and they have always been mean.

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