

A Fairy's Tale

Violet raged.

“*Tradition*,” she snarled. She grabbed a handful of the celebratory garlands strung around her neck and tore them off, crushing them and hurling them to the grass. “It’s a stupid tradition.”

“It’s more than just a tradition,” said her advisor. With a wave of her hand, the platform in the clearing smoothed itself out again, sinking back into the ground. Another wave, and the remnants of the purple flowers dissolved into bits of petal and stem. The breeze swept them away, erasing all signs of Violet’s anger. “It’s necessary. Without it, our bond with the human world would wither and die completely.”

“Then let it die.” She turned her face away from her advisor’s reproachful look.

“Without ties to humans, our world-” her advisor began.

“I *know*.” All of them knew that the borders of their forest haven were shrinking steadily year by year. “But,” she laid a protective hand on her belly, “why does it have to be *my* child?”

She knew the answer to that, too. Her advisor’s voice was unyielding. “Because you are the Queen.”

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Her older brother had been a Changeling, dull and strange compared to her other siblings. When he’d been ten, he’d wandered into the human world. Her mother had tried to lure him back, concerned about the weakening bond between the worlds, but it was too late. A human family had already taken him in, and by the Law, he was more than old enough to make his own Choice.

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For the first time, Violet wondered what had happened to his counterpart. Had he ever looked for his own? She had not heard of it if he had.

Aching, sorrowful, she went to find the former Queen.

If her mother was perturbed, she did not show it. Violet found her spinning cobweb silk, so light that it was barely visible even to Violet's eyes. "You will have other children."

"But this is my *first*." Violet could feel the kindled flame in her body. She wanted the life growing within her to be a beginning, not an end.

"It is your first," agreed her mother. She pulled a strand taut, glistening in the spring sunlight. Violet could already see the gossamer fabric it would become. "And you will give it up, as I gave up mine." Her voice was even. "As the Law dictates."

"I *won't*." Violet wrapped her arms around herself. She'd been eager to become Queen, but now she wished she could return to her brothers and sisters as though nothing had changed, selfish and uncaring in the way of all children. She had not expected to *want* her firstborn.

"You would see us dwindle into creatures of magic alone, fading away as we lose the memory of flesh, of the touch of the human world?" Her mother continued spinning, her movements never faltering.

Trying to match her mother's calm, Violet said, "I will lure a grown human to us, as we used to."

Her mother simply sighed. "Thus bringing men into our last sanctuary, with their weapons of iron and steel."

"There *must* be a way!"

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“There is a way. It is to take a first born human child and leave one of ours in exchange to maintain the balance.” Her mother’s eyes softened minutely, becoming the color of a midsummer sky before a storm. “If there were another way, I would have found it.”

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They took her child, her lovely baby with dark hair and eyes, and brought another in her place, a wrinkled, squalling, blue-eyed human. Violet could hardly bear to look at the creature. “Take it away,” she said.

“Yes, your majesty.”

She brooded and mourned. Around her, the leaves changed and fell as the forest reflected her sorrow. Eventually the branches were bare and the forest floor thickly covered. She walked through them, feeling them crunch under her feet. She did not know or care how long she walked.

Until the idea came to her.

For the first time in days, she lifted her head.

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She settled lightly onto her perch. A robin’s squawk warned her that she was too near its nest, so she moved to the side and peered down again.

Beneath her a child toddled unsteadily, regularly falling back onto its diapered bottom. Only a month had passed in the Faerie realm after she’d slowed time in

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preparation for this illicit journey, but nearly a year had gone by in the world of the humans. The baby she'd borne had grown into a lovely child, with dark hair that curled softly, framing her narrow face, and dark eyes that shone.

She was too young yet to Choose, but Violet had been hungry for the sight of her, too impatient to wait any longer.

A woman was standing nearby, humming as she hung sheets and clothing on a line. The woman spoke to the girl as she worked. "Your dad will be home soon," she said. "What shall we make for dinner tonight?"

The baby made her awkward, stumbling way over to her, grabbing onto her leg. The woman looked down at her and laughed. "Did you want a snack?"

The child lifted its arms and reached up to her before falling once more onto its backside. The woman laughed again and reached down to scoop her up. She swept a blanket out of one of the baskets and went to sit on the house's front step, then rearranged her clothing to expose one breast, the movement smooth and practiced.

The baby began to suckle immediately. The woman covered her with the light blanket, blocking her from view. There was the sound of a human lullaby as the woman began to sing.

Violet turned away.

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This time she settled on a blackberry bush growing over a fence, the thorny brambles moving aside for her.

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The girl was three years old, now, though only two months had passed in Violet's realm. She was taller, and quick, running through the grass and squealing as a puppy chased after her.

Still too young to Choose.

Suddenly she stumbled and fell, the laughter becoming a wail. "Mama! Mama!" Violet clutched a branch, digging a thorn into her palm. A thin line of red trickled down, the bramble bursting into unseasonable bloom wherever it touched.

The woman hurried out of the house and knelt in the grass. "There now. There now. Let me see," she said, her voice gentle. Sniffing, the girl pointed to her knee. "That's not so bad, just a little scratch." Leaning down, she brushed her lips over the skin above it and said, "Is that better, sweetheart?" The girl smiled and nodded. "Good. I'm making bread, will you come help me knead the dough?"

The girl nodded more vigorously and jumped to her feet, her injury apparently forgotten.

"Let's wash our hands, then," said the woman, gently leading the child back into the house.

Violet waited as long as she dared, but the child did not come out again.

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The sun was setting as she peered through the open window. The woman sat in a rocking chair, reading a story to a six year-old girl with dark eyes and hair. The girl was sitting on the floor, dressed in a nightgown.

Old enough to Choose, now.

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Violet's heart clenched as she gazed at the girl's narrow face, her ears that came to just the suggestion of a point. The girl was methodically setting up her stuffed animals and dolls in a line, seating them as though they were listening to the story.

She was beautiful.

The woman's voice rose and fell in the familiar cadences of a fairy tale. But as Violet drank in the sight of her child, all else faded away. She no longer heard the woman's words or felt the passage of time. The world narrowed until it contained only herself and her little girl, such a short distance away, yet untouchable.

Suddenly the girl turned and looked up the woman, her eyes catching the last rays of the sun.

"Mama," she said. "Am *I* a changeling?"

Violet stared, stunned.

"Yes," said the woman. "You are."

The girl merely nodded gravely. Rising from her audience of toys, she went to the woman and climbed into her lap, resting her head on the woman's breast. The woman stroked her dark hair and rocked. "How do you know?" asked the girl.

"I held a baby in my arms," the woman began, "a tiny thing with dark hair and blue eyes. Then they took her away, and a few minutes later they put a different baby in my arms, one with dark hair and dark eyes. I made a fuss, but I'd given birth to you at home. There were no other babies around you could have been switched with, and no one else could see any difference. They were convinced I was simply exhausted. They told me I was imagining things. But I knew the truth."

"Did you cry?" The girl's voice was even and curious.

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“At first I did. But I was a mama without a baby and you were a baby without a mama. So I decided that you would be my child, whether or not you were of my blood.”

The girl snuggled into the woman's shoulder. “I'm glad you're my mama.”

“I'm glad you're my baby,” said the woman, and Violet felt the bitterness thick in her throat, heartsick with it. Of course the human would love Violet's perfect daughter. That was only to be expected.

But the child had made her own Choice clear as well. Violet could never touch her.

“Would you...” For the first time, the girl's voice betrayed emotion, going small and trembling. “Would you trade me back if you could?”

“In that first week I would have,” said the woman. “But after that you were mine. My child. I wouldn't give you up for anything.” The girl went limp against her, tension flowing away. “But if I could get her back without giving you up, I might.”

“Might?” The girl frowned. “Don't you want her back?”

“Of course I do. But perhaps she likes her mama, too. I hope so,” said the woman wistfully. “I hope that, wherever she is, she's happy. I hope she knows she's loved.”

A strange, cold sensation flashed through Violet.

“The way I know I'm loved?” asked the girl.

“Yes,” said the woman. “Exactly.”

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The leaves crunched beneath her feet. The wind whistled through the bare branches. The other fairies shivered as the Queen strode past them, not daring to approach her.

She made her way deep into the woods, into the heart of her realm. They'd built a cottage here. Human children required shelter, even in Faerie. Especially with the cold wind of Violet's despair rattling through the trees.

Opening the door, she stepped inside.

The child's caretaker rose to her feet, alarmed. "Your Majesty!"

The Queen gave her a nod. "I wish to see the child."

"Of course, your Majesty. She's in here." The attendant escorted her into a small room with a crib fashioned of vines and flowering branches.

"Leave us," said Violet, and the attendant bowed and left the room, softly closing the door behind her. Violet stared down at the little girl she'd taken away from her mother.

The baby had grown in the past six months. Slowly, Violet took the gossamer fabric she'd wound around her shoulders and draped it over the sleeping child. Only her head and one small arm remained uncovered.

Reaching down, Violet touched the back of her hand. Such soft skin, like the petals of a rose. Rose. Perhaps...perhaps that would be a good name for her child.

The baby's eyes blinked open. Violet was startled to see that they had changed from their initial baby blue, becoming as dark as her own.

"Hello, little one," she said, then added uncertainly, "Hello, Rose."

The baby just stared at her, its face on the verge of crumpling.

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Hot tears filled Violet's eyes. She had waited too long. She had missed her chance. One daughter had been taken from her, and she'd been too caught up in her loss, too blinded by grief to see the other.

The little girl's face smoothed. For a small eternity she blinked at Violet, her face a puzzled blank. Then she reached out and caught one of Violet's fingers in a tiny, fat fist.

Swallowing, Violet whispered, "Can you say 'mama'?"

The baby stared up at her with bright dark eyes and smiled.