

The Fairy Tale of the Serpent Prince



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Аннотация

His scales are cold, and the curse appears eternal. The Prince has been transformed into a serpent, and only true love can restore his human form. But is Elisa prepared to sacrifice everything for the sake of a monster? She must traverse icy wastelands and survive the treacherous schemes of a wicked sorceress. Will her courage hold when her iron shoes are worn to dust? And above all – will she choose to save one whose very form inspires primal terror?

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Far, far away in the North, where the sea was as gray as if the sky had dropped its old cloak into it, there stood a castle. Its walls were thick, built to keep out both enemies and the North Wind, but the wind was slyer: it slipped through the keyholes and whistled sorrowful songs down the chimney flues.

In this castle lived a King. He wore a crown of pure gold, so heavy that by evening it always gave him a headache, and a velvet mantle embroidered with pearls. And he had a High Advisor – a clever man who wore horn-rimmed spectacles and knew the names of every star in the sky.

It would seem, what did they lack? Mountains of silver lay in the storehouses, and wine that remembered their grandfathers' grandfathers aged in the cellars. But the King and the Advisor shared a single misfortune, one quiet sorrow for two, which sat with them at the dinner table and lay down in their beds.

They had no children.

«Look at me,» the King would say, gazing into an antique Venetian mirror. «A gray hair has appeared at my temple. Soon I shall be as white as the peaks of our mountains, and who will take up my scepter? To whom shall I explain how to trim the sails in a storm?»

The Advisor would only sigh, polishing his spectacles with a handkerchief.

«Your Majesty,» he would reply, «my home is empty, too. The silence in the nursery sounds louder than a cannon shot. You

and I are like old books that no one will ever open to read the end of the story.»

The Queen and the Advisor's wife often wept at night, and their tears were saltier than the seawater beneath the castle windows. But tears cannot help grief, just as pouring a cup of tea into the ocean will not fill it.

And then came the longest night of the year. The stars in the sky shivered with cold, and the moon looked like a slice of lemon left forgotten on a blue tablecloth. The King and the Advisor sat by the fireplace. The fire crackled, devouring dry logs, and shadows danced in the corners.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the gate.

It was not the loud, demanding knock of a messenger, nor the timid knock of a petitioner. It was a knock that made the heart stand still.

The servants opened the heavy oak doors, and along with clouds of frosty vapor, a Stranger entered the hall. His cloak was tattered, as if stitched from autumn mist, and his feet were bare despite the snow. But when he threw back his hood, the King saw not the face of an old man, but eyes full of such clear blue as is never found in mortals. Summer splashed within those eyes.

«Peace to this house,» the Stranger said. His voice sounded like music one hears in a dream but cannot recall in the morning. «I have come from afar and am frozen. Will you allow me to warm myself by your fire?»

The King, though saddened by his thoughts, possessed a kind

heart.

«Sit,» he said. «The fire in the hearth belongs to God; we merely keep it. Warm yourself.»

The Advisor brought the Stranger a goblet of hot spiced wine.

The Wanderer drank the wine, and his cheeks flushed with color. He looked at the King, then at the Advisor, and his smile was sad and wise, as if he knew all that had been and all that was to be.

«You have given me warmth,» he said, plunging his hand into his tattered sack. «And I shall give you hope. The Lord sees how empty your nests are.»

He withdrew two fruits, the likes of which had never been seen in these northern lands. One was an apple – ruddy and smooth, as if it had steeped in the light of the dawn sun. The other was a pomegranate – rough-skinned and dense, concealing hundreds of ruby seeds within.

«These are for your wives,» said the Wanderer. «Let the Queen eat the pomegranate, and the Advisor's wife the apple. And when the time appointed by nature has passed, the castle will ring with children's laughter. A son shall be born to the King, and a daughter to the Advisor.»

The King and the Advisor stood frozen. Joy flared in their souls like fireworks on a festive night.

«But remember,» the Wanderer added softly, his voice sounding like the rustle of autumn rain. «Their fates will be intertwined like the roots of the old oak in your courtyard. One

cannot live without the other. And... happiness is a flower that often grows on soil watered by tears. For a great gift, a great price is always paid.»

«What price?» the King exclaimed. «I will give half my kingdom!»

The Wanderer merely shook his head.

«The heart does not pay in gold, Your Majesty. Not in gold.»

Having said this, he rose and walked toward the doors. The King wanted to stop him, to order the servants to give him a fur coat and a horse, but when the doors swung open, there was no one on the threshold. Only snowflakes swirled in a waltz, and a single star shone in the sky brighter than before.

On the table lay the apple and the pomegranate. They glowed with a soft, mysterious light, and it seemed that the cold stone hall suddenly smelled of spring, of blooming gardens, and of something very distant and beautiful.

Thus began this story – with a joy in which a sadness, small as a seed, was already hiding.

Listen now, to how strangely the threads of fate are woven.

In the house of the Advisor, in a room where geraniums always bloomed on the windowsills, a girl was born. They named her Elisa. She was so tender and translucent, as if she had been woven not of flesh and blood, but of morning mist and a white rose petal. When she laughed, it seemed as though tiny silver bells were chiming in the room, and when she cried, even the Advisor's stern old cat would come and rub against her cradle

to comfort her.



But in the royal castle, behind high stone walls, everything was different.

The poor Queen! She had dreamed so of clutching a golden-haired infant to her breast, but when the hour arrived, it was not a child that crawled from the silk sheets, but a black, glistening serpent. On its flat head, like a mockery, shone a small golden crown, fused right into the scales.

The King, seeing his son, recoiled and reached for his sword. «It is a monster!» he cried, his voice trembling like an autumn leaf. «He must be killed before he stings us all!»

But a mother's heart is the deepest abyss, at the bottom of which forgiveness can always be found. The Queen covered the serpent with her white hands.

«No!» she said through her tears. «Look into his eyes. These are not the eyes of a beast. These are the eyes of a human locked in a dungeon for which the keys have been lost.»

They named the serpent Valdemar. Ah, what a loud, glorious name for one destined to crawl upon the floor!

Years passed. Elisa grew up in a sunny garden, and butterflies landed on her shoulders, mistaking her for a flower. Valdemar, however, grew up in the high Northern Tower. He had no need for toy soldiers or wooden horses. He lay coiled on the cold stone, gazing through the narrow window at the passing clouds. What was he thinking? Perhaps he dreamed of wings? Or of becoming at least a field mouse, if only to have a warm heart and soft

fur? No one knew. The servants were afraid to enter his room, and only an old nursemaid brought him milk in a golden saucer, crossing herself with her left hand as she did so.

But then came youth – the time when the bud opens and the fledgling tests its wing.

On one stormy evening, when the wind howled in the chimneys like a hungry wolf, the doors to the throne room burst open. The guards scattered in terror. Valdemar slithered into the hall. He had grown enormous; his scales rustled against the marble like dry leaves. He raised his head, crowned in gold, and spoke.

Oh, it was a terrible voice! There was a hiss in it, yet the words were human, and in every word sounded a longing such as you will not hear in any song.

«Father,» he hissed. «I am lonely. Within my chest beats a heart that is cold. I have seen your Advisor's daughter, the beautiful Elisa, while watching from my tower. Give her to me as my wife. Only her light can warm my darkness.»

The King turned so pale he looked like a statue of snow. He remembered the Wanderer's prophecy, remembered the apple and the pomegranate. «There is no running from fate, even on the fastest horse,» he thought. And, fearing the wrath of his monster-son, he summoned the Advisor.

«My faithful friend,» said the King, averting his eyes. «Your daughter must save us all.»

The poor Advisor! He tore at his hair, but the King's will is

law, and the fear of the Serpent was great.

And so the day of the wedding arrived. But no merry violins played, and no children scattered flowers upon the road. Elisa was dressed in a white gown that felt to her like a shroud. She uttered not a word of reproach, for she was as meek as a lamb. She merely crossed her hands over her breast and prayed to God, believing that even in the darkest forest, there is a path to the light.

She walked toward the altar, pale and beautiful, and every step resonated with pain, as if she were walking barefoot over sharp ice. And there at the altar, coiled around a pillar, the Bridegroom waited. His unblinking yellow eyes watched her with hunger and hope.



«Do you take him?» asked the old priest, his voice trembling.

«I do,» Elisa answered softly, and a single tear rolled down her cheek. It fell to the floor and shattered with a barely audible chime. And silence fell, a silence in which one could hear only the beating of the frightened little heart of a poor rose trapped in a cage with a dragon.

The heavy oak doors of the bridal chamber closed with a deep sigh, as if pitying the poor bride. Elisa was left alone. Or almost alone.

In the corner, upon a mound of velvet pillows, the Serpent lay coiled. His scales shimmered with a cold luster in the light of the single candle, and his every movement made a dry, rustling sound that made Elisa's heart stand still. She stood by the window, pale as a lily that had been broken and cast onto the road, trembling so violently that even the golden stars on her wedding dress seemed to shudder in fear.

«Lord, save my soul,» she whispered, not daring to turn around.

She waited for a hiss, waited for the cold coils to wrap around her, but silence reigned in the room. The kind of silence found in a church when everyone has left, and only the angels watch from the icons.

Suddenly, she heard a strange sound. It was not a hiss, no. It was the sound of a heavy, wet cloak falling to the floor – a cloak worn by a man through the most terrible storm. Swish... And

then a quiet, pained moan.

Elisa squeezed her eyes shut, preparing for death, but then a hand touched her shoulder. The hand was warm and soft, not at all like the paw of a monster.

«Do not be afraid of me, Elisa,» spoke a voice, sad and deep as the tolling of a distant bell. «Look at me. Only the moon and you are free to see me as I am.»

The girl opened her eyes and gasped. The snake was gone. On the floor lay the shed skin – a dark, wrinkled, ugly heap resembling old, withered leaves. And before Elisa stood a young man.

He was as beautiful as a young prince from a picture book, but his face was as pale as the marble of a tombstone, and in his eyes... Oh, my friend, in those eyes splashed such anguish as not even the loneliest swan on a frozen pond ever knew. It seemed he carried upon his shoulders the weight of all the world's sins.

«Who are you?» whispered Elisa, pressing her hands to her chest.

«I am your husband, Valdemar,» he answered with a sad smile. «And I am the unhappiest man on earth. An evil sorceress, who lives where the snow never melts, cursed me while I was still in the cradle. By day, when the sun rules the sky, I must crawl upon the earth in a serpent's skin, frightening birds and men. The sun is my jailer. But as soon as night falls, I am granted a few hours of freedom. I can shed this scales to remember that I still possess a human heart.»



He walked to the window and looked up at the moon.

«Every night I fear the dawn, Elisa. Because in the morning I will become a mute beast again, and I will want to hide in a dark hole. Is this a life for a prince?»

Elisa's fear vanished like mist scattered by a morning breeze. Instead of horror, pity awoke in her kind little heart – and it is well known that pity is the sister of love. She saw before her not a monster, but a suffering soul locked in a dungeon.

She timidly reached out and touched his cheek. He flinched as if burned – so long had it been since anyone had touched him with affection.

«My poor prince,» she said softly. «Then you are not evil? You do not wish to eat me?»

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