

Handsome and Hideous: First Prologue

Once upon a time, there was a wicked sorcerer who desired dominion over all the known world, and the hidden world, too. He decided to beget a son whom he could rear up in wickedness and magic, for he trusted none but his own creation to serve him. So he found the most powerful sorceress in the world and, through cunning and treachery, kidnapped her, took her back to his tower, and made her his wife. There he bound her to him with many spells and charms so that she could not escape.

Soon the prisoner expected their child. She brooded in silence, thinking always of her hatred of her husband. Plotting how she might destroy him, she thought how the baby she carried might be used against its own father.

At last the day dawned when the child of a man's selfishness and a woman's rage was born. She was a small, wrinkly, red thing, and she cried in a thin little wail as she flailed her bent and skinny limbs. When the sorcerer swept into the birthing room to view his new daughter, he was horrified by what seemed to him a weak, ugly creature with a nerve-grinding cry. How was it possible that the child of two such powerful workers of magic could be this repulsive and helpless thing?

In his anger and surprise, he did something that he was usually careful never to do. He spoke before he thought, and he spoke words of power.

"That hideous creature is no child of mine," he snarled when the midwife showed him the babe.

His wife was exhausted from the long labor, but she smiled when she heard his words, for in them she recognized her revenge. She knew that her life was fading away, and that the nearness of death and birth within her body gave her special power. So she summoned what voice she could, and in a harsh whisper that made every hair on the midwife's head stand right up, she croaked, "*No joy, nor success, nor freedom for thee, while Hideous unloved by husband be.*" And the echoes of her death-curse were still sounding in the chamber when the sorceress slid from this life, and her husband's power, forever.

The sorcerer felt no sorrow at her death, for in his eyes she had failed at the single task he had required of her. Nor did he think much of her last words, at first, so confident was he of the bindings of magic he had placed on his wife. He strode from the room, giving orders for the disposal of his wife's body, and to ponder what he might salvage from the unsatisfactory brat now squalling in her nurse's arms.

There was among the servants a girl of nineteen who had recently lost her infant son to a fever. She agreed to nurse the child, for despite her grief, she pitied the motherless Hideous.

For that was the only name her father gave her. As the days passed and he came to realize the strength and range of his dead wife's curse, he saw no reason to change it. For the joy denied him by the curse meant that he found no success in working his magic or in pursuing his twisted plans and sly schemes. His plots came undone, his spells broke, his charms dispersed like ashes in a stiff wind. The sorcerer now gave his thought to the last words of his wife, so unexpectedly and ruinously rife with power.

And in them he read despair and misery, for he could not imagine that the horrible little creature which did nothing (as far as he could discover from the nurse) but scream, suckle, spit up, soil her cloths, and sleep, could ever be loved by anyone. She was so unremarkable, so powerless, so demanding, so tedious! If she had any magical ability it was not apparent to his eye. Had she been any other child he would have ordered her killed, just to be rid of a nuisance.

But he had learned not to speak before thinking when it came to this babe, and as he thought on the curse that imprisoned him and his power, he came to believe that killing the child would not serve him at all. If she lived, although weak and despicable, she might marry. And if she married, her husband might love her. The sorcerer speculated that if it turned out she had some small magic, she might deceive some idiot into marrying and loving her. And then he, her father, would be free.

Meanwhile, there was no reason for Hideous to live in his tower with him. So the nurse was sent away with Hideous to a cottage in a distant wood. The sorcerer sat in his tall stone tower from which he had once read the stars and now sought for ways to undo his wife's curse.

The years passed, the sorcerer's rage transmuted into despair, and he no longer sought to free himself from the harsh curse. Now he sat in his stone seat in the high room of the tower and gave himself up to the evil whisperings of hopelessness. The servants fled that dread place and told tales of their former master sitting as though carved of stone himself, staring at the floor, dreaming who knew what terrible dreams.

And as time wore away, a brilliant grit began to cover the tower, edging the high window, creeping up over the roof and down the outside wall. Soon the glittering crust had spread to the land around the tower and reached over roads and fields and towns, covering everything like frost.

But it was not frost, as the people discovered who woke one day to find corn and cattle covered with the odd sparkling stuff. It was salt. For the sorcerer was still a being of great power, though he no longer commanded much of it, and the salt of his soul had filled up his tower and was now bringing its barrenness to all the land about.

The people called the tower the Griefstone. In their distress they sent for help to their kings and queens and princes, who sent for magicians and sorcerers and witches, and to priests and priestesses and holy ones, and then to any man, woman, or child who had ever with good result spoken a word over a wart or sprinkled herbs in a potion. Yet the salt of the Griefstone did not yield to any of these, and it transformed fruited fields into deserts and bright cities into pits of human misery, while the rulers wept in their empty salt-encrusted palaces and their starving people fell into sorrow and fear.

One kingdom, however, was not conquered by the pitiless grit. The salt crept up to its borders, but it did not cross. When begged by other kingdoms and countries to share the secret of its defense, the kingdom's envoys could offer no answer. They did not know why the salt-curse spared them. They gave what help they could to others in sending grain and other food that could be carted without spoiling, but since they had worked no spell or charm they could not advise their neighbors, who took the proffered aid with suspicion and ill-grace.

The King and Queen of Tamtir did not know the source of their protection, although they wondered whether the Griefstone's salt was held back by their gods, the Sun Lady and her consort, the Dark Master. Their prayers and petitions on behalf of the stricken received no response at the temples and holy places. So the kingdom watched in sad perplexity as its neighbors succumbed to the scourge of salt, but itself thrived as ever.

Until the day the Queen became ill with a sickness no doctor, nor healer, nor holy one could name, much less cure.