

Handsome and Hideous: Second Prologue

It was hard to scrub with the screams of the woman in labor winding their way through the halls and stairs of the tower. Rue's own heart was heavy with the death of her baby not two days ago. *Dulsan*. The hard stone of the step abraded her knees as she worked, even through the coarse fabric of her skirts. She paused on the fifth step, the wooden bucket of warm water and crushed soaproot two steps above her, and sat back on her heels. Rubbing the back of one wrist over her eyes did nothing to stop the leak of tears. Her swollen breasts hurt with the milk her baby no longer needed. Another scream shredded the air and Rue bent back to her work, scrubbing with the worn brush, but lost in her own memories.

She had not screamed as much when Dulsan had been born a few months earlier. But then, she had not had the same store of rage and hatred to expel, either. Rue had come to Reavinstoft, the tower of Besserdech of the Ice Raven Clan, less than a year ago. The year before that, the other servants said, Master Besserdech, a powerful mage, had gone on a raid. He had gone to a distant land and destroyed the tower and vale of a family of sorcerers who looked to the Fire Bird. He had killed parents and children alike, all except for one girl—the woman now in childbirth. Amarrasal had been barely twenty and though strong in raw power, she was no match for the cunning and the skill of a mage twice her age. He had brought her, draped in cold chains that had glittered like adamant, to Reavinstoft, his lair. Besserdech had spoken before witnesses the words of power that would bind him to the girl, soul to soul, and had managed to stun her long enough with a spell to get her to speak her own part. When she had recovered her senses, she had found herself married to the man who had murdered her family and raped her. When she had tried to use her power to free herself, Amarrasal discovered to her horror that he had opened a magical conduit between them, so that her own strength was at his disposal. He saw her as nothing but a means of breeding a child for him: a son strong in power and trained from infancy in loyalty and submission.

For a time, or so said the scullery girl to Rue, the mistress had tried to win the aid of the servants. But Amarrasal was a visible sign of her lord's power: since their binding rite, she was always enveloped in a cold blue glow. No one asked about it but everyone knew that the glow was the result of the spells Besserdech had laid on her. And if he could do that to a daughter of the only mage bloodline that had rivalled his own in power, what could he do to a plain mortal?

When Amarrasal had realized she was pregnant, she had withdrawn from the life of Reavinstoft completely. She ignored the servants who cleaned her room and tended the fire. Food was brought and the dishes removed after the food was eaten without a word or a glance from the still form sitting by the window, shrouded always in the blue glow that never wavered or faded. Yet the very stones of the tower seemed to echo with her bitterness, grief, and rage.

For his part, Besserdech had no dealings with his captive wife once she was with child. He had all he needed from her: a direct channel to her reservoir of power and the promise of a son. If Amarrasal wanted to sit and brood, it made no difference to him or to the plans he laid when he shut himself up in his study in the highest room of the keep.

Rue was at the midpoint of the main stair that wound up the center of the tower when the tenor of Amarrasal's cries changed, so close that she could hear the murmur of the midwife speaking to the laboring woman. Suddenly, Amarrasal shrieked. Rue clapped her hands over her ears, one fist still clutching the scrub brush; the wet bristles pricked her flesh and dripped water into one ear. A blue light pulsed inside the room and there was a flash as if of fire. Rue stood so quickly on the step that she

nearly lost her footing. The blue light retreated; the laboring woman fell silent. The midwife crooned. Then Rue heard the thin, lost cry of a baby. Her milk-heavy breasts began leaking in response to its wail. Rue turned and sat down hard on the still-damp step, grinding the heels of hands into her eyes as she tried to contain her tears.

She had stopped crying but had not yet returned to scrubbing when the hard, sure steps of the master sounded in the stairway. Besserdech had realized that the birthing was over and he had come to inspect his son. He strode into his wife's room and Rue heard him demanding something of the midwife. Her voice was muffled, but his rang out, full of outrage.

"A *girl*? Let me see!" There was a sound of movement from within the room. Rue started on the next step. There were more angry words from Besserdech, and pleading ones from the midwife. Rue heard "scrawny" and "weaking" in the master's harsh tones and "healthy" and "beautiful" from the low-voiced midwife. She did not see the step that she had now scrubbed well past cleanliness; the memory of Dulsan as a newborn, red-faced and wrinkled, filled her mind's eye. She moved the bucket again. Now she was scouring the landing outside the door of the birthing room.

"That hideous creature is no child of mine," hissed Besserdech.

A croaking, horrible laugh interrupted the midwife's protest. The sound of it was so disturbing, Rue froze on her hands and knees outside the door, her scrub brush still. Then the mistress's rasping voice, hoarse from screaming, spoke slowly, every word as sharp-edged as carved rock: "*No joy, nor success, nor freedom for thee, while Hideous unloved by husband be.*" Another crack of bleak laughter that ended in a kind of sigh, and then silence.

"Y—your lady-wife—she's—she's dead!" whispered the midwife, shocked.

"Yes," said the cold voice of the baby's father. "Good riddance, if all she could produce was this powerless runt." Rue heard him approaching the door and she moved herself and the bucket against the wall, out of his way.

"But what of the babe?" the midwife asked.

"Find someone to keep it alive until I decide whether it's worth anything or not," snapped Besserdech. He did not even glance in Rue's direction as he swept out of the room and up the stairs, his dark robes billowing after him. Rue watched his tall form, the dark head bent in thought, vanish around the curve of the staircase. This was a man whose wife had died mere moments ago? Whose child had just been born?

The midwife stood at the door with the swaddled baby in her arms. She looked about and saw Rue. The baby started crying; Rue crossed her arms against her chest, trying to suppress the reflexive let-down of milk. The midwife's eyes narrowed speculatively.

"Are you nursing?" she asked.

"I was, but—but my baby died," Rue answered.

"You still have milk?"

"Yes," said Rue.

"Take the child then," said the midwife, stepping out of the room. "Your mistress is dead and the babe needs you." She held the baby out to Rue.

Rue slowly put down her brush and wiped her rough, wet hands on her skirts. She thought of her own Dulsan, and a flash of resentment burned through her. This child lived while hers was dead. Then the little face twisted and the seeking mouth opened and closed on nothing. The brows knit over the screwed-up eyes and the baby howled her indignation. Rue had the baby in her arms before she had made the decision to take her. She stood and nudged aside the bucket and the brush with her

foot, rocking the baby against her. “Shh, little one,” she whispered. “Soon.” She walked down the stairs she had just scrubbed, hearing distantly the midwife calling for another servant to help with washing the dead woman and cleaning up the birthing room.

Rue found a quiet corner in the kitchen and slid to the floor with her back to the wall. She opened her dress and guided the small mouth to her breast. As she looked on the little face, so intent in its desire for sustenance, for life, Rue knew this baby was no replacement for Dulsan, just as she was not the child’s blood mother. But maybe they could be candles for each other in the ocean-darkness of grief and loss.

A week after the master’s wife had died, he demanded to see the baby, whom he called Hideous. Rue climbed the stairs to the highest room where Besserdech had his study. Holding the infant carefully in one arm, she knocked at the door, waited for the barked order to enter, and walked in.

She had never been inside the master’s room before. No one was allowed to clean it; she had never taken him food there. She looked around as she hovered by the door, reluctant to come in further without an explicit command. The single, large, octagonal room had glazed windows at the four cardinal points of the compass. Two large worktables were piled with books, papers, and instruments of glass and metal. Shelves on three of the walls between the windows held scrolls and other papers, as well as vials, jars, and pots of clay, iron, and copper. In the wall to the right of the door was a large fireplace with a fire burning. A huge chair of jet-black stone streaked with silver dominated the center of the room. Rising from the chairback with its wings outspread was a carved raven, its beak open, and one diamond eye fixed on the doorway. It seemed made of the same kind of stone as the chair, but of a blindingly white color instead, veined with black and ice blue. Rue’s gaze stopped at the sight of the stone bird, and she hesitated under its staring eye.

“Come here, girl,” commanded the master, and she saw him then, a tall thin dark shape at the eastern window. “Let me see the creature.”

Rue crossed the room and stopped before him. She was reluctant to expose the baby to this man’s cold gaze, but she nevertheless folded back the blanket so that he could view his daughter. Besserdech stared down at Hideous in silence for a moment.

“Lay her down,” he said, pointing to one of the long tables. Rue took her to the table, and after the sorcerer had pushed aside some papers, laid the baby down. He then unwrapped the baby completely and began poking and prodding her. The baby started crying and her father’s lips tightened, but he continued his examination. Rue wondered what he was trying to discover. He held his hand above the child and Rue cried out at the flash of blue light. She tried to grab the baby but Besserdech slapped her hands aside.

“That bitch,” he snarled, and turned away. He returned to the window and stared out of it, his hands knotting themselves behind his back, his mouth an angry twist.

Rue meanwhile had picked up the baby and soothed her cries. The child did not seem to be hurt, but Rue carefully swaddled her once more and waited for further orders, not daring to leave until she was dismissed.

Besserdech swung around and looked at the girl holding his daughter. To Rue it seemed as if he were being forced into a decision, and that he resented it with all his considerable will.

“Do you know where the Scuranox Wood is, girl?”

Rue nodded. It was a large wood to the east. The trees there did not provide good timber for building or furniture, but a few villages on its edges harvested firewood and made charcoal for selling. No road led through it, besides woodcutters' paths, for it was too thick and tangled.

"There is a cottage in the heart of it. Take Hideous and go live there. Return when she is married." Besserdech turned back to the window.

Beyond him snow was beginning to fall. Still in shock from the abrupt orders, Rue said, "Today, master? It is—" Her words dried up as he whirled and strode toward her. He did not stop until he was almost on her; Rue leaned back from his looming, furious form, her body curled protectively around the baby, who had started crying once more. His daughter's wailing seemed to make Besserdech even larger and more frightening.

"Yes," he hissed, his voice no less terrible for being so soft that only Rue could hear him. "Take Hideous and go, today. If you are not gone by sundown, I will throw you from this tower and find someone who can obey simple commands."

"Yes, master," Rue said. But she did not move, wondering if she dared...She felt his rage expanding, almost like a cloud of freezing air emanating from his body. Rue dropped to her knees, her forehead almost to the floor, holding the screaming child close to her chest.

"Master, I will go! Only...may I give her another name?"

The cold air retreated, and Besserdech laughed with a bitterness that felt like a slap in the face.

"You are welcome to try," he sneered, and turned away.

Rue scrambled to her feet and ran out the door.

An hour before sunset on that day of deep winter, a girl swathed in a coarse woolen cloak that bulged over the pack on her back shut the door at the foot of the tower behind her. In her arms she held a well-wrapped bundle. The snow fell thinly as she trudged away from Reavinstoft.

Later, after she had found the cottage, and all through that hungry winter, Rue had wondered what Besserdech had meant by his last words. She tried to give Hideous other names, but whenever she thought of one and bestowed it on the child, Rue could not remember what name she had chosen even a few minutes before. And the baby, which had seemed like any other at first, was growing into the name her father had given her, becoming truly what he had called her: Hideous. Rue stopped calling her by name.

After a few years, Rue heard from the woodcutters and wanderers who travelled through the wood that her former master no longer left his tower and did not even speak to his servants or to any visitor. Later, more strange stories reached her ears: the servants had fled Reavinstoft and told tales of Besserdech sitting as though carved of stone, staring at the floor, silent as death itself. And then, they said, 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 people discovered who woke to find fields and roads covered with the odd sparkling stuff. It was salt. For Besserdech was still a being of great power, though he no longer moved about in the world, and the salt of his soul had filled up his tower and was bringing its barrenness to all the land about.

People now called the tower the Griefstone and they sent for help to their kings and queens, who sent for magicians and witches, and then priests, priestesses, and holy ones, and at last to any man, woman, or child who had ever with good result spoken a word over a wart or sprinkled herbs in a potion. But the salt of the Griefstone did not yield to any of these.

Meanwhile, in their cottage in the wood, Rue cared for Hideous. And while the sorcerer had been right that his child could bear no other name, he had been wrong to think she was ordinary and powerless, with nothing of either himself or her mother in her.

The years passed, and the wood about the cottage grew even darker and more tangled; the trees armed themselves with thorns, and travelers were even fewer than before. The wood that enclosed the cottage of Hideous and Rue withstood the acrid grit that crept forth from the Griefstone. Only one other realm resisted the salt-curse: an ancient, but minor kingdom near the sea, named Tamtir.