

From an open window high up in the palace came a scream that rent the air and shattered the peace of the morning. The leaves of the large butterfly tree in the courtyard below took flight, the pink and white wings fluttering in a horde of thousands. They swirled together in a beautiful storm cloud for a moment before settling back down on the tree limbs where they belonged. A young, curious grassland bird with jade green plumage and wings all the colors of the rainbow flew down onto the windowsill and peeked inside.

Queen Diamond Fairface of Wonderland lay on her bed of silk pillows and satin sheets, now stained with the blood of labor. Even with sweat on her brow and chest and the dark circles under her eyes, she was breathtaking. Although, it must be said that she had help. One handmaid brushed out the long, raven hair fanned out on her pillow. Another glossed her full, rosy lips, reapplying what she had bitten off in the throes of her labor pains. Yet another dabbed her face with a powder puff, taking the sheen off her skin. They did not stop even as she screamed again and her lovely face contorted with disgust. She gazed upon the babe that the midwife held outstretched to her, her eyes wide with disbelief. She clutched the bundle in her arms closer to her chest as if to protect it from the child in the midwife's arms.

"Oh, it's hideous," she said. "Quit dangling it in front of me. I don't wish to see it."

The young grassland bird on the sill turned its eyes from the queen to the babe, and it let out a squawk and took flight.

"Can't you see it's distressing her?" said King Spade, clutching his wife's hand. "Take it away."

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the midwife. "You, girl," she snapped at the handmaid who had just put away the gloss, "take this to the nursery."

She held the baby out to the handmaid, who made a face that seemed to ask why she always got stuck with the unpleasant tasks. She took the baby and looked down at it with both curiosity and distaste. How could such an unsightly thing come from the queen? The baby's head was not perfectly round, but slightly oblong and completely bald. It was rather long and gangly for a newborn. Its cheeks were not fat and rosy. Its lips were thin and pale, not full and pink. Its eyes were muddy brown and lackluster. *What a perfectly ugly little thing*, thought the handmaiden as she carried the child from the bedchamber.

When her newborn daughter and the handmaid were gone, Queen Diamond sighed with relief and looked lovingly down at the bundle in her arms. The newborn boy was everything his twin sister was not. He was chubby and cherubic, but not fat. His cheeks were little, supple cherries. His eyes were big and already bright blue. A thin layer of impossibly soft black hair covered his perfectly round head.

King Spade, his wife's only equal in beauty, reached out to touch the child's face and tickle him under the chin with a finger. The child's blinking eyes found his father's, and King Spade smiled a smile so dazzling it nearly brought the two remaining handmaidens to their

knees. His jaw was square and sharp with an auburn shadow of scruff along it. His eyes were as blue as his newborn son's. His muscles were pronounced under his embroidered silks. His thick hair fell in waves to his shoulders, just a shade darker than his beard and held back from his face by his gold and red velvet crown.

"Thank goodness one of them is beautiful," said the queen, "or else I might have died of shame. I just can't believe how ugly the other one is. I don't understand how it could have happened. What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing, dear," said the king, stroking her high cheekbone with his finger. "You mustn't blame yourself. It's a fluke, bad luck, that's all."

"But what are we going to do?" said the queen, the last word a wail of despair.

"Well, we will just...well, we could...we'll always put the boy in front," said the king, a desperately giddy smile on his dazzling face at finding a solution. "He's so beautiful no one will notice the other one."

The queen only wailed louder. "It won't work," she said. "Everyone will still know that that ugly, wicked thing came from us. Who could take us seriously knowing that? We'll be a laughingstock."

"Never, Your Majesty," said the handmaid still brushing the queen's hair.

The queen stared at the girl in horror, having just realized there were already witnesses to her shame. The king looked around the room at the two handmaidens and the midwife. His jaw grew tight.

"Out, all of you," he said.

The three women curtsied and left the room with uneasy looks.

"No one else must ever know, Spade," said the queen. "No one else can see her. What shall we do with her?"

"We'll lock her away in the castle, out of sight. At least so long as she remains...the way she is. I would not be surprised if her looks improved, my love. Some newborns are unseemly, you know, but they grow into beauty. Surely, with us for parents, the girl will do the same."

"Oh, I had not thought of that," said the queen, a smile tugging at her lips. "Yes, surely she will."

"But we must take precautions in case she doesn't," said the king. "Only the servants who have seen her today will know what she looks like. They will attend to her. We will tell everyone else she is terribly ill and must be kept in bed."

“Gina and Danielle cannot be trusted,” said the queen, her voice low and secretive as she looked toward the bedroom door. “They will blab it to the whole kingdom. The midwife, Giselle, and the handmaid who took the ugly little thing away, Feline, they can keep quiet, but we will have to raise their wages.”

“Then we shall raise them,” said the king. “As for the other two—”

The queen rubbed noses with the babe in her arms and said in a cooing baby voice, “We’ll have to take their pretty heads.”

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“Nonsense, nonsense,” said Giselle, one hand on her hip as she shook her blonde head. “Nothing but nonsense pouring out of your mouth day and night.”

Irina stared back at Giselle with a stubborn set to her mouth and placed her own little hand on her own bony hip in an exaggerated mockery. Giselle rolled her eyes.

“Now let’s try it again,” said Giselle. “What am I?”

“You’re beautiful, Giselle,” said Irina. She spoke quite well for a five year old, but she still had trouble with complex vowel sounds, and the word came out “bootiful.” Her brown eyes narrowed as she said it, and her thin eyebrows slanted downward in defiance and anger.

“No, no, no, silly girl,” said Giselle, waving her hands about to show the absurdity of the suggestion. “I’m pretty. That’s why I work in the palace. I have to work, but I don’t have to do nasty jobs; I get to work for the king and queen. Beautiful people don’t have to work unless they want to. Do you understand? Do you know why I am pretty and not beautiful?”

“You’re beautiful,” said Irina, still glaring.

Giselle pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “I am not beautiful because I have big ears and knobby knees, see?” Giselle pulled her blonde hair back with one hand to show her ears and hitched up her skirts with the other hand to reveal her knees. “I’m just pretty.”

“You’re beautiful,” said Irina.

“I am not; I am not!” said Giselle, her voice a shriek. “Quit talking nonsense or you’ll get no supper. Do you understand, you stupid little thing?”

Irina glared but said nothing.

“Now, what am I?”