

The Brambleford Twins

Once upon a time in a land far away there was a Duchess of Summer, fair and frightful, who wished for children to call her own. Being barren herself, the Duchess sent word with her subjects to find a new-born baby in the mortal realms. None of them dared travel on the paths of the thorny forest that surrounded and stretched far beyond the Duchess' domains, but one name was known for being the best at bringing in new blood: An outsider who traveled the Hedge as he wished. He was Malade, the trader, and he was quickly summoned to the wooden courtroom of the Duchess. He arrived clothed in traveler's clothing, a vest made of ferns and a wide-brimmed hat covering page-fashioned hair. Taking off his hat, he smiled with a wide mouth and the eyes of wit before he bowed before her grace. He accepted the contract to bring a child and set out on his wagon with a trusted accomplice, a squirrel dressed in a blue hat and coat.

On their third day looking, the two found a pond leading to our lands. The trader himself no longer set foot in the mortal realms, but with the flick of his wrist, he opened the pond for the squirrel to pass. Not only could the squirrel search the closest towns very quickly, but also unseen.

Completely invisible, the squirrel found a baby, Aurora. Three days old with gold-red hair and puffy cheeks, she lay silent in her crib. This was the village of Brambleford, a forester town of simple life and few luxuries. Excited to please his master, the squirrel hurried to grab the child, but ill luck befell the squirrel as he carried off the babe above his head. He dropped his hat and was rendered visible. Before he could pick it back up, the child's father, a woodchuck of repute, saw them both and gave chase. The squirrel ran back to the pond with the woodchuck close behind. They both dove through the pond, where the squirrel's saviour was waiting. Malade overpowered the man with ease, glad to have a bonus mortal to trade, and then stooped over the baby Aurora with his wide, wicked smile. Looking deep into her eyes, Malade took a piece of her shadow lurking deep within. Aurora, who until then had been completely calm and quiet, started to cry. Malade, unfazed, produced something from his pack, a doll made out of porcelain, and put the piece of Aurora's shadow into it. The restrained woodchuck watched as the doll, a fetch, formed and contorted into his baby girl's exact appearance, gold-red of hair and puffy cheeks. He saw the fetch get sent back with the squirrel to be placed into the baby's crib and he feared what was to come for himself and for his baby girl.

No fetch had been prepared for the woodchuck, but Malade thought himself wise in dealing with mortals. A mother, he reasoned, could suffer a husband running away without seeking revenge, but never the disappearance of her child, and so it was of no consequence. The woodchuck got no replacement and when the squirrel returned, they set off to the lands of the Summer Duchess.

The woodchuck was put to slavery in the Duchess' domains. The Duchess claimed the crying baby and Aurora gained a new mother, but what the Duchess had in mind when she set out to have a baby was a romantic fiction that did not correspond well with reality. Each night, the baby's loud screams kept the Duchess awake, and during the day its excrement ruined dress after flowery dress. The Duchess was impatient to begin with and she grew tired of the

ever-crying child after merely three suns had sailed the sky when she handed over the care to a servant.

The woodchuck saw how his Aurora was passed between servants with no more knowledge how to foster her than the Duchess had, and with no power to care for her himself, he called out to Malade for help. The trader showed himself, heard him out and told him that yes, for the right price, the babe could indeed be brought back to her real mother. Nothing in Malade's contract with the Duchess forbade him from taking her subjects away from her lands once he'd acquired them for her, and the Duchess obviously did not care for her to stay, but the woodchuck had nothing to trade for his daughter's life. Malade silently eyed the crying baby, smiled a terrible smile at the woodchuck, and suggested a remedy.

And so, after having been in the land of fairies for one full week, the woodchuck swore upon his own life: In return for Aurora to be safely taken back to the room from where she was stolen, the woodchuck, if ever released from the rule of the Duchess, was to be in Malade's employ forever more, never to betray his orders. While this was the only option available to the woodchuck, swearing on one's life should never be taken lightly and Malade was no good man. He was a trickster and a wordsmith. He enjoyed playing with people's minds, health and fate, and he knew that one day, the daughter would be back for her father to set him free. Malade also noted that while the contract was for Aurora to be taken back to her room, the woodchuck never thought to demand her fetch to be destroyed, nor taken away.

After a thoughtful silence, Malade agreed and the deal was struck.

The lands beyond the mortal realms have strange effects on time. In Brambleford, barely an hour passed between the time that Aurora was taken from her crib until she was back. The woodchuck was nowhere to be found when his wife, worried sick, found a new baby in a basket on the windowsill. Confused, the mother looked from the baby in the crib to the baby in the basket and saw no difference in their appearance. However, it was of no consequence to tell them apart, for one child cried, the other did not. The mother found that no other babies had been delivered that week and no call for a missing child had been heard. She decided to act as if the two babies were born twins, and the story was accepted.

A squirrel donning a hat left Brambleford that night not to see the village again for thirteen years. And so the years went by.

The silent baby in the crib, thought to be the original, was never any trouble. The mother loved her dearly, and thus the fetch made out of porcelain kept the name of Aurora.

The crying baby found in the window, thought to be the extra, was renamed Diana. Her shadow in pieces, the girl grew up troubled, unknowingly a changeling, and the mother came to look upon her with fear, suspicion and judgment.

The Duchess never knew the baby went away from her lands. Such is the nature of fae that clarity comes and goes, and so she forgot about her daughter and never mentioned the subject. Of course, that changed the day her baby came back.