

The Young King

Once upon a time a baby prince was born to a king and queen who had waited a long time for him. The young prince was a healthy, happy baby. On his first birthday, important people came from all over the kingdom to give the boy presents and to wish him and his parents goodwill. One of these gift-givers was Sarasel, a beautiful lady from a kingdom far away. She gave to the family a small flowering tree that had never before been seen in their kingdom. Before she left, she asked if her daughter would be allowed to attend the nuptial court when the prince came of age.

In those days, when an heir to the throne turned eighteen, a nuptial court was held. Eligible girls from all over the kingdom, and from other kingdoms as well, came to live in the castle for one year. The prince would get to know the girls and at the end of the year, he would name one his queen. Young men were also invited, as the nuptial court was intended to create husbands and wives among the minor royalty as well. At the end of the nuptial court's year, three balls were held. At the first ball, the prince announced his bride. At the second ball, other couples announced their engagements. At the third ball, the lovers married and celebrated.

When the beautiful lady asked for her daughter to be admitted to the baby prince's nuptial court, the king and queen agreed.

The next years passed happily. The prince grew to be handsome, strong and clever. The king and queen ruled fairly, and their country flourished. However, in the prince's sixteenth year, an illness swept the kingdom, killing many, including the king and queen. The young prince, now the Young King, was devastated. He ruled over a grieving country and spent much of his time mourning in darkness. Several months before he was to turn eighteen, the Lord High Chancellor reminded him of the nuptial court.

“I have no desire to dance jigs or court ladies,” answered the Young King.

“Our country has been in mourning too long,” the Lord High Chancellor replied. “The people need something to look forward to, something to hope for. Your eighteenth birthday and the nuptial court come at just the right moment. It is tradition.”

Although the Young King resisted the idea, eventually the Lord High Chancellor had his way and when the Young King turned eighteen, eligible girls and boys from near and far arrived, including Rebbi, the daughter of the beautiful lady from long ago. Rebbi had grown into a beautiful lady herself, both strong and delicate, like the sweet-smelling, flowering tree her mother had given the Young King so many years before. Her beauty was such that many thought the Young King would choose her as his bride at the end of the year.

The Young King was polite and kind to his visitors, but his grief remained--until he met Elle. Elle was the youngest sister of the ruler of a neighboring kingdom. She had lost both her parents to the terrible sickness too. The Young King asked Elle to walk with him in the gardens, to take tea with him privately. She convinced him to attend the dances, where he danced and smiled. Many in the nuptial court were surprised by the attention that Elle received from the Young King. For though one side of Elle's face was beautiful, the other had been disfigured by the sickness that had killed her parents.

Members of the nuptial court made bets on whom the Young King would marry. He spent most of his time with Elle and Rebbi, and though Rebbi was the more beautiful, many believed the Young King loved Elle.

The day of the first ball dawned bright and clear. Rebbi arrived late, on her own, and couldn't see the dancers because of the crowd.

“What's happening?” Rebbi asked a young man who stood on tiptoes.

The young man answered without turning. “The Young King has arrived with Elle on his arm. He's dancing with her now. There can't be any doubt. He's going to marry Elle, not Rebbi, and that will earn me ten ducats.”

A flame of anger sparked in Rebbi's heart, but she held it back. She pushed her way through the crowd, arriving at the dance floor where the Young King was indeed dancing with Elle.

When the music stopped, she walked toward the Young King as she always did after his dances with Elle. And, like always, he bowed his head to the deformed girl and took Rebbi in his arms.

Rebbi was a fine dancer. She and the Young King glided gracefully around the floor.

When the dance was over, Rebbi kept hold of the Young King's hand and led him to the punch table to serve her. He poured her a drink and smiled and chatted, but his eyes wandered. The flame in Rebbi's heart burned hotter.

The Young King politely left her side to dance with other nuptial court ladies.

Rebbi wandered the room, listening to the gossip. Some felt Rebbi would be his choice. Others stated that Elle was sweet and popular; most appeared to be betting on the deformed girl. Rebbi discounted the opinion of the nuptial court. Rebbi had been told by her mother that she was destined to marry the Young King.

At the stroke of midnight, the Young King stood before the crowd to announce his bride.

Rebbi stood tall. The Young King glanced to where she stood, and her lips curved the smile of victory. She walked toward the Young King, her hand stretched out to his.

"I present to you, Queen Elle," said the Young King to the nuptial court.

Rebbi froze. Elle had been standing beside him all along, just out of Rebbi's sight. The Young King swept Elle into his arms and kissed her.

The crowd cheered, and the fire in Rebbi's heart ignited.

A thunderclap shook the palace. Rebbi lifted her arms, hands stretched. Fire flew from her fingertips.

Several women screamed.

Elle's eyes opened wide in fear, but the Young King looked scornfully at Rebbi.

“You will pay for this slight,” cried Rebbi, her voice crackling like a raging fire.

Fire flew from her fingertips, sizzling and popping. Rebbi spun on her heels, lowered her arms and made for the doors, the crowd parting to let her through.

Though Elle was worried, the Young King assured his one true love that all would be fine. The day of the second ball dawned bright and clear. Many engagements were announced, and the ball was a cheerful, joyous event.

Their wedding day dawned bright and clear. The Young King and Elle and sixteen others were married in the traditional nuptial court ceremony. The newly married couples ate a fine meal and danced at the ball. Hope and happiness had returned to the country, and everyone celebrated with good cheer.

At midnight of the third ball, the doors opened to admit Rebbi's mother, Sarasel.

If the Young King could have remembered what she looked like when she had visited on his first birthday, he would have noticed that she had not aged a single day. The Lord High Chancellor noticed. “A sorceress,” he thought and sent guards toward the woman at once.

Before the guards could reach her, in movement magical, the beautiful lady slid in the center of the room. Dancers stood silent and stared as she raised a staff in-laid with a shimmering ball. The Young King and Elle watched from behind the high table.

The musicians paused their playing. Sarasel spoke.

“You have broken the heart of my only daughter.” Her voice was soft but commanding, easily heard by all in the room. The orb flashed and her next words rolled like thunder, “I curse you!”

The crowd gasped.

The Young King stood strong. “I don't believe in your curse. Leave, at once. Guards!”

The sorceress spoke in her soft voice, as if the Young King had not said anything.

“Because you have broken the heart of my daughter, your children shall be born with broken hearts. They will not survive their first month.”

“Guards!” the Young King repeated.

“You are cursed!” thundered the sorceress. Light exploded from the orb, and Sarasel disappeared.

The room was silent, until the Lord High Chancellor ordered the musicians to play and prodded people. Slowly dancers filled the floor.

“It's all smoke and mirrors,” said the Young King to Queen Elle. “I don't believe in curses. Magic isn't real.”

The first child born to the couple died from a weak heart when it was five days old. When Queen Elle became pregnant with their second child, she begged the Young King to search for a magician to right the wrong that had been done them. Many men came forward with potions and magical words, but none of them saved the second child, who died after two weeks.

News came from across the seas that the sorceress and her daughter Rebbi had been killed in a battle with a powerful wizard. People hoped the death of the sorceress would end the curse, but the third child was born with a weak heart and died after ten days.

Queen Elle became pregnant once again, and the kingdom held its breath in fear. The queen read books and talked with midwives and witches, foreigners and learned men, anyone who could offer advice, but most admitted they didn't know how to end the curse. Swollen with child, Elle prayed a prayer she had prayed a thousand times, and when she fell asleep, she dreamt a dream she'd never dreamt before.

In her dream, she held her baby in her arms. The child was newborn, but Elle felt none of the pain of childbirth. Instead, she felt a deep joy and a remarkable fearlessness. Elle walked through the palace gardens with the baby in her arms. She knew, without knowing how, that she was about to save

the baby's life. Elle stopped beside the tree that the sorceress had given her husband on his first birthday. The tree's flowers were shaped like small bells, with fresh seeds dangling from a sticky stamen. Elle tapped the stamen and a single seed stuck to her fingertip. Placing her finger inside the baby's mouth, Elle watched as the infant sucked and the tiny seed slid down her throat.

In the morning, the Young King told Queen Elle that he'd received a letter from a wise man across the sea who felt the curse could only be cured by a gift from the sorceress.

“Even if she were alive, can you imagine her giving us a gift?” said the Young King in scorn, throwing the letter on the table.

The dream came back to Queen Elle. “We have a gift from the sorceress,” she answered. “The seeds will save our baby.”

And so it was. Every newborn royal baby was fed a seed from the tree, and lived long past its first month. Three healthy sons and three healthy daughters were born to the Young King and Queen Elle. And they all lived happily ever after.