

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a voluminous green dress with a large brooch on her shoulder, is shown from the waist up. The background is a fantastical landscape with a castle on a hill and a body of water.

ALMA AND THE FAIRY

A ROOK AND SHADOW SHORT STORY

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The Rook and Shadow Prologue from Lady Alma's Point of View

The entire castle had been bustling with excitement since the princess was born. The entire kingdom. I could feel the hum of energy even up in my studio. I bustled around, gathering supplies and looking out at the sea every few minutes to admire the view. My orange taffeta gown rustled when I moved. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror and snapped a few more yellow bows onto the skirt. No need to look plain.

Now, about that gown for the princess.

They hadn't named her yet. King Nicholas and Queen Ingrid had been arguing about the name for months, but hadn't settled on anything. Apparently Salarians waited for a christening ceremony to name their children. At least, the nobles did.

I smirked, picturing a Salarian peasant couple standing on their porch, holding their newborn up for all the neighbors to see.

"I name her--"

My mind went blank. What would a Salarian peasant would name a daughter? I settled on Vonda. It sounded vaguely Salarian. I think I had an assistant named Vonda once. Or was it Felda?

"I name her Vonda!"

Their neighbors would cheer for a few moments then go back to their houses.

I had lived in Salaria for a while, but many of their traditions still didn't make sense to me. Why not just name the child when she was born?

Of course the princess's christening would be a huge celebration. The king and queen would present her from the balcony above the courtyard, and peasants would crowd into the courtyard under it. Nobles would watch from their balconies and windows, comfortably lifted above the masses.

I waved my hand, and a length of purple silk slid out from from a drawer. It floated through the air, rippling gently before landing on my worktable. It never got old, working magic. I always felt a rush of excitement when I shaped the fabric into something beautiful. Something new. The salt charms around the room glowed silver as I pulled magic from them to split the fabric into pieces. I could use soul magic, of course, but I preferred to save that for more complicated projects. A gown for an infant certainly didn't qualify as complex.

I didn't have much experience working with children. I'd made costumes for them a few times, when Queen Ingrid wanted a children's chorus in an opera production, but that was about it. It was tricky. The clothes were so small, it was hard to get the embellishments just right. And their proportions were different from adults.

Making a gown for an infant was even trickier. I had the princess's measurements, but she would be wearing this while lying down. And she was pretty much a shapeless blob with a head.

A faint wail echoed through the chamber. I sighed. The princess cried all the time. I was halfway across the castle, but the sound still carried whenever anyone opened a door to the nursery.

I took the dress form I had created from her measurements and wrapped the purple silk around it. The gown should be simple. Most of the crowd would be far away. I snapped my fingers and gathered the hem into a ruffle, then snapped them again and loosened the fabric until it hung straight. I rustled through a drawer, found some diamonds, and attached them to the edge of the hem.

When they caught the sunlight, she would look dazzling!

Something wasn't quite right, though. The purple, meant to stand for royalty, seemed too pretentious for such a tiny dress. I snapped my fingers and changed it to blue.

No, still not quite right. I frowned and rubbed my chins. I had two of them, but a third was starting to form. I just kept expanding. I knew it would happen, but it was getting ridiculous. I was practically round. I had enchanted all my clothes to lift me up a bit, to help support my weight. This would let me be nimble no matter how big I got.

Another snap, and the silk turned pink.

"Cliche, but it really does look better that way."

There was no one else in the room. If I took an apprentice, I wouldn't have to talk to myself all the time. But the potential apprentices Queen Ingrid had offered me were so useless I told her I preferred to work alone.

The dress was adorable, but this baby was a princess. She needed to be more regal somehow.

Red would be good.

I waved my hands in small circles. Red ribbons flew off the table and tied themselves into bows. With a slight flick of my wrist, I sent a needle through the air to sew them onto the dress. I could hold them on with magic, but this dress was for an infant. Did salt magic have the same effect on young children that soul magic did?

I didn't intend to find out.

"Your technique has improved, darling."

The voice floated through the air a split second before golden sparkles lit my studio. Both made me frown. I glared at the woman who emerged from the shower of light.

She was tall. Much taller than me, but then everyone was. Her long green dress and golden hair rippled around her even though there was no breeze. She folded her delicate golden wings behind her back. I could just see the tips of them over her shoulder, hidden beneath her hair.

Her skin glowed. I had seen a drop of fairy blood once, a pure bead of amber filled with a flame. The longer I looked at the fairy, the more sure I became that her blood was what illuminated her skin. She was glowing from within.

“Divinia,” I said. “What a surprise.”

“And a pleasant one, I’m sure.”

It was not. I was not excited to see her at all. What did she want?

How is Lorenzo?

The question popped into my head, almost as unwelcome as Divinia, but I refused to ask it.

Divinia walked around my studio, examining bolts of fabric and spools of thread.

“Is this what you’ve done with your life, Alma? Become a common seamstress? That is a shame. You always had such potential.”

Potential she tried her best to cover up. Seeing her brought back memories I’d buried in my work and magic. I felt like I was fourteen again, back in Castana, unsure of the world and myself.

I had built a new life in Salaria. I was happy. I used magic to make beautiful things.

I was not a common seamstress.

Divinia finished examining my fabric and turned her attention to the work tables. She rested her hand over a carved wooden box on the table. My eyes narrowed. We both knew what it held.

“Is that why you’ve come? After all these years?”

She dared to smile at me. After everything, she dared to smile. Her eyes traveled up and down my short, round figure.

“Well, you’re obviously not using it. Do you mind? I know it was a gift, but I really could use it for a project.”

I shrugged. Divinia’s smile widened, and she opened the box. A faint silver glow escaped the lid. She pulled a silver necklace out, weighed it in her palm, and tucked it into the folds of her skirt.

I should have thrown it into the sea when I had the chance. Why did I keep it?

I never planned to wear it again.

The door to my studio swung open.

“Lady Alma, are you ready yet? I-”

Queen Ingrid stood in the doorway, staring at Divinia. Her jaw dropped. She looked completely stunned.

Divinia looked the same. She obviously didn’t plan on being seen by anyone but me. She stared at the queen with wide eyes. I felt a smile twitching at my lips.

“Your Majesty, may I introduce the Fairy Divinia? Divinia, this is Queen Ingrid of Salaria.”

Queen Ingrid’s face burst into a smile.

“Oh, you’ve actually come! Of course I hoped, but I never thought you’d actually- Oh, Nicholas will be so surprised!”

The look on Divinia’s face was priceless. Any trace of smugness disappeared completely. Queen Ingrid clasped Divinia’s hands. Divinia stared at me. She had no idea what was going on.

Neither did I, but that didn’t matter. My smile widened.

“I’m sure you have a lot to discuss. I’ll just take this down to the nursery.”

I picked up the pink and red silk dress. Divinia tried to subtly signal me to stay, but I ignored her. Queen Ingrid beamed at me.

“Please do, Alma. The colors are perfect.”

Of course they were. I don’t make mistakes.

I curtsied and left the room. Behind me, Divinia was trying to figure out what to do.

“As you, uh, said, Your Majesty. I have come.”

I chuckled to myself as I walked down the hallway. It made my chins jiggle. Divinia was stuck. She couldn’t just poof away. Queen Ingrid would track her down. She’d already written one letter to the fairies. If they found out she’d visited, Divinia would have to explain why.

And that would mean explaining why she gave me that necklace. Explaining that she had broken their rules and interfered with human lives.

A piercing wail echoed through the corridor as I approached the nursery. Thank goodness my room was on the other side of the castle near my studio. Thank goodness I refused the offer of a room in the royal suite when I had the chance.

Three nursemaids hovered over the cradle, offering the princess a variety of toys. She ignored all of them and continued to thrash and scream.

“Lady Alma,” the head nursemaid said. “Please tell me they’ll be ready to begin the christening soon!”

There were dark circles under her eyes, and the sort of panic that comes with extreme stress.

“I have her gown ready. They should be starting any time.”

The nursemaids oohed and aahed as I presented the pink and red dress. The diamonds twinkled. The princess stopped crying and reached for them.

“Expensive taste,” one of the nursemaids joked.

“Well, she is a princess.”

I snapped my fingers, and the dress disappeared from my hands and onto the princess’s tiny body. The motion startled her, and she started to cry again. Louder than before, if that was possible.

“Ugh,” the head nursemaid said. “This is the loudest baby I’ve ever cared for. What could be taking them so long?”

I stared down at the princess. What was taking them so long? Divinia should have worked her way out of the situation by now. Fairies don’t interfere. Explain that, let them down gently, and poof away.

“Let’s move her to the balcony,” I said. “I’m sure they’ll be ready soon.”

The head nursemaid picked up the princess. She didn’t stop crying. The other two nursemaids waved their hands and floated the cradle along behind us.

The crowd in the courtyard was huge. Much bigger than I expected. Peasants had climbed the walls because there wasn’t any room on the ground. Even the nobles in the castle looked crowded. They squished onto their small balconies and pressed their faces to the windows. I scanned the crowd for Rosa, but I couldn’t find her. She must be here somewhere though. It seemed everyone in Salaria had crammed into the courtyard.

Even the royal balcony was crowded. The most prominent lords and ladies huddled to the side, jostling each other for a view of the princess. A painter had an easel set up in the corner. He sketched pencil outlines on canvases. The paintings would be completed later, when there was more time.

The head nursemaid put a white cap on the princess to protect her from- something, I’m sure. I flicked my wrist and changed it to the same shade of pink as the dress. It still looked a bit off. I leaned over the cradle to adjust the angle.

There. Much more becoming.

The princess was still crying.

Someone entered the balcony. I turned to greet them and frowned. Divinia walked in beside the king and queen.

“Your Majesty, what is she doing here?”

The queen’s face glowed with excitement.

“Oh, she’s going to bless the princess!”

My whole body tightened. I clenched my jaw. Impossible.

“Your Majesty, I must object. This fairy-”

“Oh, I know it hasn’t been done in a while, Alma, but that’s what makes it so exciting!”

They had no idea. Fairies weren’t supposed to interfere. Not since the mountains wept. Not since the fairy snow. Not for over a hundred years. And she didn’t come to see them. She wasn’t here to bless the princess.

She was here for me.

I needed to fix this. Now.

I turned to the King.

“King Nicholas, please reconsider. Divinia-”

The crowd’s cheers drowned out my voice. They came to see a princess, and now there was a fairy as well.

What a show.

Divinia had already started. She held the princess awkwardly in one arm and snapped her fingers. Golden dust and sparkles covered us and filled the courtyard. I snorted. She was just showing off! The sparkles did nothing!

But everyone blinked, dazzled.

I pushed my way through the blinding golden dust.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “Just go home. She doesn’t need your blessing.”

“Don’t be jealous, Alma. Just because you didn’t appreciate my work doesn’t mean others won’t. Now stand back. You don’t want any of the beauty to land on you.”

Of all the nerve! I stepped forward, hands clenched into fists. I wanted to slap her, tackle her, do anything to stop her! But Divinia giggled and hugged the princess tighter. If I attacked her, I might hurt the princess.

Or Divinia might.

She spoke the spell, and her words echoed through the courtyard.

Dark as a rook's wing, hair flows like the Ghone.

Night prism eyes reflect colors unknown.

Moonlight complexion, pearly reflection.

By every standard, you are perfection.

Radiant voice like the song of a star.

Reddest of roses, loveliest by far.

I name thee Salara, Salarian princess,

Born to be queen of them all.

Ideals align, beauty be thine.

Names, souls, and destinies all intertwine.

While I tried to process what those words actually meant, what effect they would have, Divinia thrust Princess Salara into my arms and disappeared in a flash of light.

Salara. Salara of Salaria. She named the princess after the country. It would have been better to call her Vonda. Princess Vonda. Princess Salara. The whole thing seemed ridiculous, but everyone around me looked very serious.

I stared at the baby in my arms. She seemed alright. Her skin was clear, and her eyes were bright.

Impossibly bright. Like dark stars in a pale sky.

She opened her mouth and inhaled. I braced myself for a shriek. The sound that came out sounded like crying, but also like music. Everyone in the courtyard listened in rapt attention, and we all sighed in disappointment when it stopped.

Princess Salara had fallen asleep.

I handed her over to the head nursemaid reluctantly. Queen Ingrid fluttered around, talking to herself and waving her hands, already planning art projects around her newly beautiful daughter.

King Nicholas just looked thoughtful. He bowed to me as he left.

I waved my hand, trying to sense anything out of place or unusual about the baby. She seemed normal, but I didn't know much about medical magic.

Rosa might be able to help, if I could convince her to come back to the palace. She didn't get along well with the queen. Both of them were too opinionated. Too passionate about completely different things.

I wandered back to my studio, dazed. Queen Ingrid would want a new dress for tomorrow night's dinner. I expected she would want something inspired by the fairy's visit. I pulled out every green fabric I had and layered them on a dress form tailored to the queen.

I closed my eyes and pictured my family back in Castana. Father and Donna Senona, the day of their wedding. The memory made my stomach jolt slightly, and I locked on to that motion, pushing it until my soul circled around my body in a loop.

This gown would be tricky. I would need soul magic to recreate the waving, ephemeral look of the fairy fabric. Using the magical energy from the loop, I adjusted the fabrics, making some more transparent, adjusting the textures in others. Something halfway between velvet and silk for the base. Organza for the top, but the color needed to be darker. When it looked right, I stopped my soul loop, pulled a small salt charm from a drawer, and pinned it to the skirt. The fabric rippled in the still evening air.

Ingrid would love it.

I rummaged through my shelves for gold trim. Would wings on the back of the gown be too much?

"Imitating my look? I'm flattered, Alma."

I looked up. Divinia stood beside the dress. I couldn't help being proud. The gowns look almost identical.

Then I felt horrified.

“What have you done?” I asked. “How does the spell work? Has she been harmed?”

“I have you to thank for all this, Alma. You introduced me to Queen Ingrid, after all.”

“You already have a godchild.”

I said it through gritted teeth, and his name hung unspoken between us. Divinia knew not to mention him. She wasn’t willing to push me that far.

And I wasn’t willing to ask.

“I have a godchild in Castana,” she said. “Salaria is completely different. This is a young country, Alma. They don’t have centuries of traditions to uphold. Can’t you feel the energy?”

“Fairies don’t interfere. You said it. Celia said it. Fairies don’t interfere.”

“And I won’t. Consider me completely out of your life now. Completely out of Salara’s life. Out of Salaria. I don’t expect to return anytime soon.”

“Good.”

I watched her. She was not quite finished. She would leave if she were finished.

“What?” I said.

“I was just wondering if you really want to give this up.”

She pulled the silver charm out of her skirt and dangled it in front of my face.

“It could do you some good, you know. Put it on, catch a ship to Castana...”

“Get out.”

“Very well. Goodbye, Alma. Any messages you’d like to send?”

“No.”

She shrugged.

“Suit yourself.”

Divinia disappeared in a flash of golden light.

I sank into a chair.

What had she done?