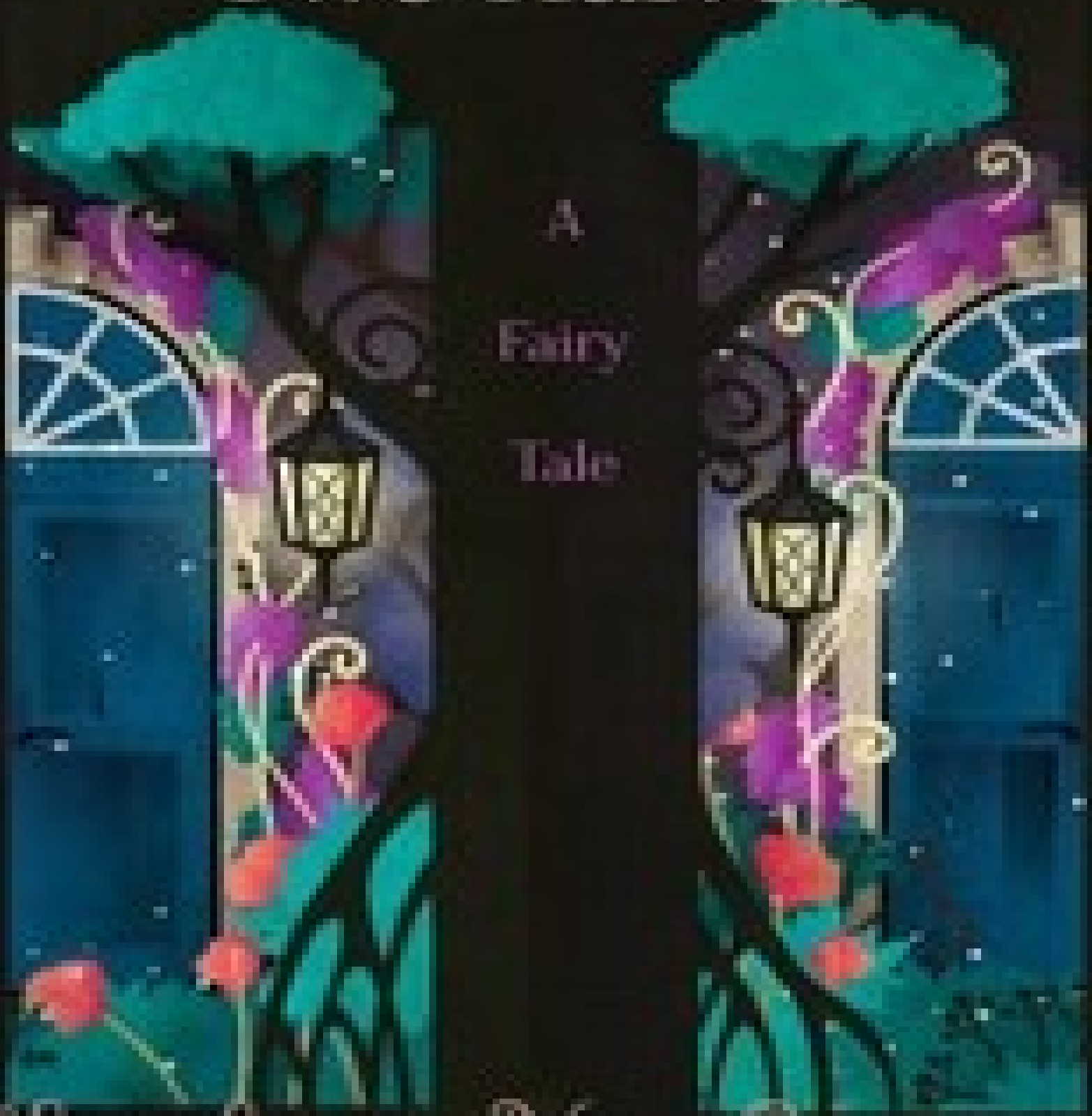
The House with Two Halves

A Fairy Tale



Stephanie Van Orman

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ONE

Torsten sat in the window seat in his bedroom. Half of the stained glass window was flung open and sitting so near the window, he gave the whole court something to see. His beauty was rare and rich as he was the youngest son of the King and Queen. He was a prince. However, he had a very different fate from the other princes of the kingdom.

He shook out his blond hair, blinked his coppery eyes, and hated everyone so thoroughly it should have melted the glass in front of his eyes and burned the seat under his bottom. The hate flared through him so utterly that it should have caused him to spit acid, breathe fire, and puke poison.

However, nothing happened.

Instead, he sat there and the world stayed the same around him. The world did not care if it was unfair to him. The wind still blew, the sun still shone, and flecks of dust hung in the air like time stood still. For everyone else, it was an ordinary day, but not for him.

For him… it might be the last night he slept in his bedroom.

Ever since Torsten was a little boy, he had known he was different from his older brothers. They were trained to fight as knights, and given lessons in strategy so that they might lead armies. In contrast, Torsten was taken with his sisters to have his hands groomed.

When he was little, he thought it was because he was too young to engage in warfare, but as he grew older, his schedule didn't change.

Instead of being taught how to sharpen a sword, he was taught how to read and write. Not just the basics, but how to read aloud well and how to write in long curling letters. When he was thirteen, he was sent to apprentice to a painter to learn how to paint. He would have liked it better if his brothers had been included in the exercise, but instead, they were beating dummies in the courtyard while he was instructed to keep his hands free of paint and kept apart from them.

The only lessons he was allowed to attend along with them were the riding lessons. He was taught alongside them how to groom and care for a horse. It was then that he realized that he was three inches taller than his older brother. He would have realized it sooner, but they rarely stood side-by-side.

"Mother, why am I not being trained in warfare? I have a better body than Callum," he complained. "I can see the top of his head."

She turned and looked at him with sorrowing eyes. "Darling… this is a special time that you get to spend with me."

Torsten did a double take. He was fourteen years old and it had never occurred to him that no matter what activity he did, he was always kept close to his mother. He had sisters. They were near her too, but not as close. If his mother reached out at any given time, she could touch him. He sat next to her at the dinner table. His room was closer to hers than any of his other siblings. He would have asked his father his question, except he rarely saw him. He was off with Torsten's brothers.

Something was wrong.

Maybe, he had always known something was wrong.

But he hadn't discovered what it was until the day he spat hatred out his bedroom window. He was nineteen. He was more than a

man and his clean hands painted and wrote. His trained voice spoke and sang. His gloved hands handled a horse well and his clothes were unstained in his own blood, which set him apart from his brothers.

Earlier that day, the answer to Torsten's evaded question had been revealed. A bird had arrived at the watchtower. They used carrier pigeons and falcons at the castle, but the bird that perched on the battlements was neither. This bird was yellow with a long tail like a flag, black stripes on its face, and black blots on the tips of its wings.

At its arrival, Torsten's mother fainted and the truth came out. She was taken straight to her bed and the King took Torsten to the armory… a place he had never been admitted to before.

He didn't know what his father was going to say, but he knew that the bird meant the time he had to spend with his mother was over. All children had to part from their parents at some point. Some were sent to rule smaller parts of the kingdom, some were married off in diplomatic alliances, and some… Well, a lot died. He knew he had a sibling who had died… a younger brother who hadn't quite made it. Torsten barely remembered him. What would have happened if his little brother had lived? Would Torsten have avoided the fate of the youngest son? Would Torsten have been taught to fight with his older brothers instead of learning to paint?

Inside the armory, the King closed the door to give them privacy. He was a gruff man with a strong voice, but no way with words. He began by saying something neutral. "That bird was more than an omen. It was a message with no parchment attached to its ankle. Its arrival itself was enough to convey the message. Do you know what it means?"

Torsten shook his head wordlessly.

His father looked sorry. Sorry for everything… but he wasn't a coward and he explained. "In all our fuss about warfare and defending our kingdom, have you ever noticed that we are never attacked from the north?"

Torsten had not noticed. They fought the Barbarians to the east and the Pagans to the south, and they had an alliance with the Mustards to the west, but he had never even thought that they faced