

## **Honorable Mention: A Simple Errand** *by Mike Podgor*

The fairies entered the child's room and flew over to his crib, landing softly on a rail and cooing over his adorable fatness. He didn't seem to notice their presence.

“He'll be a fine addition,” said the one known as Coral.

“The Queen will be quite pleased,” added the one known as Anemone.

“Such a chubby little lad,” said the third, known as Kelp.

A fourth voice chimed in. “Why are you here?”

The fairies froze and looked towards the newcomer. It was a small human girl with a bruise covering the side of her face, and she was carrying a stuffed animal of indeterminate species in one hand. The other was in a sling. The fairies and the girl stared at each other for a solid minute. Since neither party had ever encountered this situation before, no one was sure how to proceed.

The girl finally broke the silence. “My name is Mindy,” she said. “Are you fairies? You look like the ones in the book my momma gave me.”

Coral seized upon this. She had seen such books before and knew what was expected. “Yes, little lass. We've come to grant boons to your baby brother, only we've got to take him somewhere to make sure they work properly.”

“Yes, and we promise we'll be careful,” said Anemone.

“And we're certainly not going to replace him with a fairy child,” said Kelp, who had never been good at subterfuge. The other two glared at her and she continued, “What? I said we're not going to do that.”

“Daddy said that fairies don't exist,” said Mindy.

Coral shifted gears. “Yes, dear. This is all simply a dream.”

“A dream,” agreed Anemone.

“But sometimes dreams come true,” said Kelp, who didn't seem to understand what the other two were trying to accomplish until she saw their furrowed brows. She hastily added, “But not this one! Just a dream, this one, with no impact on reality at all.”

Mindy considered this. “Which is it? Are you here to grant boons or are you not here at all?”

Before Coral or Anemone could do anything, Kelp took to the air and shouted, “The brat's on to us! Quick, girls, we've got to make a move!”

“I'll just cast a sleeping spell on her,” said Anemone, taking flight.

“No time for that. We'll just magick the boy and ourselves away. No one will believe her,” said Coral, beginning to weave her own spell.

Mindy was completely unfazed by all of this and dropped her stuffed animal on the ground. The moonlight shone on something woven into it, but the fairies were too busy to take notice.

Mindy yawned and said, “Before she left, Momma said it was up to me to keep my brother safe. Poppa can't do it, not yet. If you take my brother, you have to take me, too. I don't think Poppa would mind very much. He hasn't been the same since Momma left.”

The fairies looked at the sling and then at the girl's face. Coral raised a hand and the trio retreated to a corner of the ceiling. "All right, so what do you think we're looking at here?"

Kelp looked at the girl. "I think maybe it was an accident in one of those carriages they travel in? Always dangerous, those."

"We could take them both. I don't think we'd even need to leave a fairy child," said Anemone.

"I don't know, it all seems a bit trap-like to me," said Coral. "Besides, situations like this never go well for the fae. I think we should just leave."

"Oh, yes. And if we took both of them, the father's suffering might lift and he'd take up arms against us," added Anemone.

"Well, I want to fill the quota," said Kelp.

"I think I saw another baby a few houses down," suggested Coral, but it was too late.

Before the others could stop her, Kelp floated over to the baby boy and began to weave a transport spell. Coral and Anemone moved to stop her, but it was already too late.

Mindy's mouth moved and made words a girl her age couldn't have known the meaning of, ancient words with deep origins. The stuffed animal rose to its feet. Light shone off iron weaved into its arms and legs with mystic thread that altered itself to accommodate the creature's new proportions.

It swiped, knocking Kelp into the wall and ending her spell. Coral flew toward her and was stepped on by a giant plush paw. Anemone hesitated in the air, and the stuffed creature opened an impossible maw and swallowed her whole. Coral regained her senses just in time to see Mindy peek out from behind her guardian.

"Momma said to protect him," she said. "I've been reading her book. So I know about fairies."

Coral realized that the book might not be the kind she thought it was. "Yes, yes! We'll let the others know! We'll stay away!"

"I'm sorry about your friend," said Mindy, as Coral weaved a spell to get her and Kelp the hell out of there.

Once they were gone, the stuffed creature's magic no longer sensed any other arcane presence. It shrank back into a small stuffed creature of indeterminate species, and Mindy took its paw in her hand. She made sure her brother was all right. He had slept through the whole thing. She dropped her stuffed creature to reach through the bars of the crib and squeeze his little hand. Then she scooped her guardian back up and found her dad in his study.

"It was fairies this time, Poppa," she said.

Her father looked up from his research into how to resurrect the dead with a small smile and said, "Then this might work."

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***Mike Podgor** is a writer, artist, playwright, actor, and general creative type from Northeast Ohio. He has been engaging in such activities as long as he can remember and seeks only to add more things to his ever-growing resume. More of his creative work can be seen at [www.fictosphere.com](http://www.fictosphere.com).*