



Beauty and the Werewolf (A Tale of the Five Hundred Kingdoms)

By Mercedes Lackey



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Bella knows all too well that breaking spells is never easy. But a determined beauty, a wizard (after all, he's only an occasional werewolf) and a little Godmotherly interference might just be able to bring about a happy ending....

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Editorial Review

Review

"Lackey's satisfying fairy tale will captivate fantasy readers with its well-imagined world and romance fans, who will relish the growing relationship and sexy scenes."

-Booklist on The Fairy Godmother

"Fans of Lackey's Valdemar series as well as general fantasy enthusiasts should enjoy this classic fairy tale with a pair of proactive, resourceful heroes."

-Library Journal on Fortune's Fool

"[P]lenty of twists and laughs...most of the fun comes from finding all the fairy tale in-jokes peppering the pages.

-Publishers Weekly on The Sleeping Beauty

"A delightful fairy tale revamp. Lackey ensures that familiar stories are turned on their ear with amusing results. Appealing characters faced with challenging circumstances keep the plot lively. You don't want to mess with godmothers!"

- RT Book Reviews on The Snow Queen

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Mercedes Lackey has written over one hundred titles and has no plans to slow down. Known best for her tales of Valdemar and The Five Hundred Kingdoms, she's also a prolific lyricist and records her own music.

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The door opened, spilling out light and heat and laughter and a snatch of music into the darkened street. It closed again, and Isabella Beau-champs shivered with delighted anticipation.

"Come on!" she urged her twin stepsisters, as they hung back a little. "It sounds like the dancing has just started!"

"I still don't think—" said Amber.

"It's so...declassé—" said Pearl.

"Of course it is," Bella replied, laughing. "That's why it's going to be fun! For once, you're going to come to a dance and enjoy yourselves!" She seized each of them by the hand, and tugged them to the door of the

Wool Guild Hall.

"But what if someone—" said Amber.

"Recognizes us?" finished Pearl.

"You're wearing your masks, for one thing," Bella replied, logically. "And for another, *those are last year's gowns*. Would anyone believe you'd wear last year's gowns?"

"No!" they replied in chorus, and then giggled behind their free hands. "They'll probably think I'm Jea-nette," said Amber. "And Pearl is Marguerite."

"Very likely. Now come on!" Providentially, someone opened the door once more, and Bella pulled them through it before they could object again.

Last year's fashions had included a vogue for "shepherdess gowns," although these looked like no shepherdess that Bella was familiar with. She had successfully managed to get them to keep the gowns rather than giving them away as they usually did when the fashions changed, arguing that they would make good fancy-dress costumes.

Both gowns had short skirts that showed the girls' feet in embroidered dancing slippers, trim little ankles in silk stockings and a hint of ruffled pantaloons. There were only three ruffled petticoats and no crinolines. The undergowns were of silk, embroidered with sprigs of flowers—though only in the front, where it showed. The draped overgowns were of silk-satin, trimmed on the hems with silk roses and three layers of ruffled lace. The bodices were tight-fitting, but not so tight that they wouldn't be able to breathe—unlike several of the girls' more fashionable outfits—and were made of the same satin, lace and silk roses as the skirt of the overgown. Pearl's was pink, Amber's was lilac. When she had first seen the gowns, Bella had thought privately that they looked less like shepherdesses and more like cakes with girls stuck in the middle. But then the vogue for all things bucolic had brought a set of porcelain shepherd and shepherdess figurines into the house, and she realized that *this* was how people who had never seen a living sheep thought their minders looked—and the fashion copied it.

Once inside she dropped their hands and paused, waiting for the impact of the room to fade. At the far end of the Hall was a raised platform, and the entire platform at the moment was covered in musicians. Not content with hiring just a few, the Guild had hired every decent musician for miles around, and even paid them to rehearse together. There were fiddlers, flute players, a drummer, three harpists, four lutenists, a trumpeter and players of instruments Bella couldn't even name.

Just now they were playing for a Running Set dance—and both of Bella's sisters made identical little Os with their mouths and clasped their hands together with delight. They'd never seen anything like this, of course. It wasn't the sort of dance that their dancing master would teach or approve of.

It was at times like these that Bella really adored her silly little stepsisters. They might be frivolous, they might think far too much about fashion and far too little about virtually everything else, but they had good hearts. Where girls who put on airs would look at this gathering and turn up their noses and sniff with disdain, they looked at people having fun, thought it wonderful and wanted to join.

The musicians were sawing and plucking and blowing for all they were worth, and keeping up an exhausting pace. Those who weren't dancing were clapping and stamping in time. And as Pearl and Amber were about

to discover, anyone could join the dance at any time. Bella grinned as she spotted three stalwart lads separating themselves from the crowd on the sidelines and heading straight for them.

The Wool Guild had far more male members than female, and even with the addition of daughters and other relatives, unattached women were thin on the ground at a gathering like this one. Add as these three unattached women were young, shapely and what showed under their masks was comely enough, she was not at all surprised to see three more young fellows detach from another part of the crowd and head for them, too.

Bella never did see how they sorted themselves out. She had already chosen her partner from the six as they approached, and maneuvered herself so that he was the first to get to her. He was quick; he grinned as he saw her coyly reaching for him and he seized her hand, swinging her into the Set without a single word. She had no fear that her sisters would get into trouble, not here. The matrons of the Guild stood as chaper-ones to every young woman who entered the Hall tonight, fierce dragons ensuring not only the safety of the girls, but that their boys were not ensnared by a young woman who was "no better than she should be." This allowed the young to enjoy themselves to the hilt in freedom—limited, but still freedom—and let them revel in the anonymity of their masks.

Bella loved to dance. Especially country dances. The fancy nonsense taught by their dancing master was too mannered and contrived to be fun. You had to think too much about the steps, and the music was as mannered as the dances. The Running Set left her just warmed up, and when another partner presented himself for a Chardash, she was more than ready to step out. She did keep a bit of an eye on her seventeen-year-old stepsisters, but they were having the same innocent fun that she was. They never had the same partner twice, they never spent too long in the company of any one young man and when they finally got winded—much sooner than Bella did, but then they didn't get nearly the exercise that she did—they repaired to a bench big enough for only two, where they were surrounded by young men eager to bring them cups of punch and flirt harmlessly with them. Pearl's careful arrangement of curls was beginning to come down, but for once, she was indifferent to the disintegration of her perfection. In fact, the next time Bella came around the floor, she saw that Pearl had pulled out her hairpins and taken a ribbon to make a simple headband with a flower tucked into it. Privately, Bella thought the effect was much more flattering than the overdone hairstyle that she had been sporting.

The musicians signaled that they were taking a rest by ending the dance with a special flourish. Without being asked, Bella's partner escorted her to her stepsisters. There wasn't room for her on their bench, but she didn't mind; she stood behind them and accepted a cup of punch from yet another young man.

"I don't have to ask if you're having fun," she said, pulling a fan off her belt and vigorously cooling herself with it.

"I don't know when I have ever had such a good time!" Pearl whispered, as Amber giggled and sipped punch demurely. "No one has this much fun at the parties we get invited to."

The twins had caught their breath by this point, and allowed new partners to carry them off into the dance. For a moment Bella found herself without anyone to chaperone and without a partner—

"Alone and defenseless. Just the way I like them," purred a voice in her ear.

Reflexively she stomped her neat little heel onto a set of booted toes, thrust an elbow behind her and nimbly leaped over the bench the twins had been sitting on. Since the current dance was a very lively Dargason, this

went entirely unnoticed.

There was a muffled yelp and an equally muffled curse as reactions to her assault, but when she turned, whoever had accosted her was gone already.

She knew who it was, however. There was no mistaking that voice. Duke Sebastian's Gamekeeper—who was rather too superior to allow anyone to call him a Gamekeeper to his face, insisting on the loftier title of *Woodsman*. He was, without a doubt, taking advantage of the fact that this was a masked ball to try his luck and his charms on girls who were here *with-out* Guardian Mamas. Well, too bad for him, the dog; he'd found a bitch who would bite back. *Serves him right*, she thought, seething a little. She didn't seethe long, though; a moment later the musicians struck up "Jenny Pluck Pears" and a partner materialized out of the crowd, and she was back to doing what she loved best.

Much earlier than she would have liked, but about the time it was prudent to take leave, she and the twins met at the bench again in a similar state of happy, panting, overheated exhaustion. "I really do not think," Amber puffed out, "that another round of punch is going to restore me one little bit."

"Me, either," Pearl panted, though she looked wistful.

Bella nodded. "All right, then, they've just brought a fresh bowl out. Let's slip away while there's a mob for punch."

About this time of night people started slipping something a bit stronger than wine into the punch, too. Not that, given the enormous bowl that was kept filled, one bottle of brandy was going to have much effect—but it was better to leave while the only unpleasant spot on the festivities was that wretched Gamekeeper, Eric.

Once out in the night air, they were glad of their cloaks. Things were very frosty. "I think it will snow again soon," Bella remarked, as the three of them hurried through the silent streets to Henri Beauchamps's handsome house. "If you don't mind people knowing it's us, we can go skating on the pond by moonlight as soon as the ice is hard enough. There's usually a bonfire and chestnut sellers and mulled cider and music."

At nearly four years older than her stepsisters, Bella had been sneaking off to these dances long enough to know exactly which ones were going to be great fun, as this one had been, and which were ones that it was prudent to stay away from.

Bella unlocked the private door into the garden and gave each of the girls a little basket she had waiting on a shelf above where most people would look. "We're home!" she called up the staircase. "The girls found some nice things."

As she expected, it was Genevieve's maid that appeared, not Genevieve herself. "Mistress would like to see you when you have all changed into something more comfortable," she said, with the little sniff that told she meant *cleaner*.

"Of course, we brought her a few things, as well. We'll be there in merest moments," Bella said breezily, ignoring the snub. She didn't at all mind; it meant that Genevieve was not going to be asking why the girls were in their shepherdess frocks when the gowns were no longer the mode and were rather unsuitable for scrambling about in their father's warehouse.

Henri Beauchamps was a merchant trader, as his father had been before him, and his father before that,

coming up from a mere peddler with a single donkey; at the moment, he had a thriving business in furs, although at one time or another he had dealt in practically anything that wasn't living and couldn't be eaten.

Bella had always had the run of the warehouse and the freedom to take anything she pleased, but when she had asked the twins if they wanted to go to the dance, she had hit upon the notion of saying they were going to the warehouse with her.

Now, the reason Bella went combing through the old stores was because she had an uncanny knack for finding forgotten treasures there. Many had been the time when Genevieve, Amber or Pearl would look at some bit of lace, panel of delicate embroidery or other little addition to her gowns and ask where she had got it. If she answered "the warehouse," there would be much sighing, for this meant it was not likely there was any more of it, nor would be ever again.

Genevieve was consequently quite happy to allow her girls to go rummaging through the building—which was not at all dusty and dirty, though you could never persuade her of that. Thus, a perfectly reasonable explanation for why the girls would be out after supper. Bella had, in fact, made the selections in the three baskets yesterday.

They all hurried up to their rooms. The twins' maid was one of Henri's household, and was completely loyal to Bella; no fear there that the twins would be tattled on. And Bella herself did without a maid; she had elected to do so as soon as she was old enough to dress herself, and saw no reason to change unless the gown she had to get into was more complicated than the simple things she usually wore. When she was comfortable in nightgown, dressing gown and heavy plush robe with matching blue slippers, she picked up her basket and went to her stepmother's room.

Genevieve was sitting up in bed, like an expensive porcelain bed-doll on display, surrounded by the boxes and jars and cabinets full of the pills she took for her many—mostly imagined—ailments. Genevieve fancied herself an invalid. She kept three doctors busy—

Well, she *would* have kept them busy if they had actually been treating her. Instead, they were pretending to treat her, honest gentlemen that they were, giving her harmless concoctions made of flowers, simple herbs that could do no harm and even bits of baked cookie dough. They charged her father almost nothing, and yet, because they knew Genevieve so very well, they were alert to anything that *might* be an illness, serious or otherwise. He in his turn kept these old friends well supplied with the finest wines and brandies that he came across in his trading ventures, so it was a good arrangement all around.

"It's Genevieve's hobby," he had once told Bella, when she made some scornful remark about it. "It's harmless enough since I am not actually paying my friends anything, and she is not being dosed with things that really *would* make her ill."

Users Review

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