

Rumpelstiltskin's Last Word

by Christy Noel

The tiny brown mouse crept forward, wary of the cell's occupant, a dwarfish man with a scraggly beard and tattered clothes that reeked. The man gnawed at crusty bread, occasionally muttering.

The movement caught his eye. "Hello." His voice rasped. "I didn't see you." He plucked a scrap of bread and tossed it to the mouse. "It's been a long time since I've had friendly companionship."

The creature retrieved the fragment and nibbled at the edges. Bright black eyes reflected the dying torchlight. The rodent fixed unblinking eyes on the man, ready to scamper behind one of the bales of hay stacked about the chamber.

"Look at my reward for trying to make a friend!" He rattled the chain binding his leg to the wall. The clatter startled the mouse; it scampered through a crack.

"Sorry! Come back."

A twitching nose soon reappeared as the mouse remembered the abandoned morsel.

"The cause of my misfortune," muttered the prisoner, gesturing towards a short stool stationed before a worn spinning wheel. In contrast to the chamber's squalor, a single bobbin shone with the honeyed gleam of gold thread. It seemed incongruous because the filament traced back through the wheel to a loose pile of straw.

“The curse that plagues my days. But not for much longer.” He croaked, a peculiar sound that resolved into a rough sort of chuckling. “I had good news this week... The princess is to marry in a fortnight.”

The mouse groomed its face.

“Why have I waited for this?” He puffed himself up. “I would *never* harm the girl.” He deflated with a sorrow-filled sigh. “She is the only innocent in this and does not deserve the fate that awaits the rest.”

“I imagine she looks like her mother.” His gaze lost focus. “Let me tell you a secret. The queen started life as a poor miller’s daughter.”

“The king held a fair, and during the exhibition, the girl’s father bragged that she could spin gold from straw. He’d gotten the idea from some gypsies he’d overheard.” Yellowed, crooked teeth peeked out between parched lips.

“The king locked her up, threatening her life if she could not demonstrate her gift.” He shook his head. “Had I only kept silent! My gypsy family possessed this rare trait. My mother warned me, as a child, to never use it for personal gain, ere it become a curse.

“I heard the girl crying. We talked for hours and became friends. I told her what I could do, and she gave me her necklace in return for my performing the miracle.

“The king found the spools of golden thread in the morning, not a straw left. He wanted more and locked her in a larger room. I helped her again. Afterwards we pledged our love and she gave me her ring. As we passed the hours before dawn, we joined as only a man and woman can.” He sniffled.

“The last happy night of my life!” He yanked at his grizzled beard. “The next day, the king promised to marry her if she could repeat the feat once more. He didn’t threaten her life any more.”

Scurrying up a block of hay, the mouse perched.

“She asked me to spin the gold for her one last time, even though she was free to leave the castle. She broke my heart.” His eyes narrowed. “But I knew something she

didn't, thanks to my heritage. Our previous night's tryst would bear fruit. I made her promise me the child in return for my aid.

"I left them to their marriage. But I returned to claim my child.

"The queen wouldn't allow it. We argued. I had never told her my name, so I made her promise to give me the child if she couldn't guess my name in three days."

"She sent spies everywhere and discovered my name the first day. But she feigned ignorance until the end.

"On the third day, just as I reached into the crib, she shouted, 'Rumpelstiltskin!'" He kicked a tuft of hay. "Then she had me carted off to the dungeon."

The prisoner slipped into silence, and the torchlight subsided into a dim red glow. The mouse scampered about, seeming to forget the man. The man's eyes followed its shadow.

Spotting the last lump of bread by the man's leg, the mouse approached. The instant it sniffed at the stale piece, the man lashed out and snatched its tail.

"I'll have my revenge. I'll stop my spinning the day the princess is wed. The queen vowed to kill me if I ever stopped." He chortled. "It'll be like the goose that laid the golden eggs, but better."

The mouse squirmed.

"The minute I'm dead, all the gold I've ever spun will revert to hay!"

Croaking laughter echoed as the little man hurled the unfortunate creature. It smacked the wall and flopped to the floor where it remained, unmoving.