

Rapunzel

The new princess was healthy, vigorous, and vital, and showed no signs of sickness (or *desire to escape the sinful world of man and return to Heaven*, as some said). A wet nurse was promptly found for her—and just as promptly sent away by Queen Arianna, who wanted to care for the baby herself. And who could blame her? Rapunzel was jolly and fat, had pink cheeks, and loved a good snuggle. The only thing at all strange about the newborn was her hair—it was a beautiful silvery color and already several inches long when she was born.

Old Nanna Bess, in charge of the maids and servants and widely thought of as the mother of the castle, dismissed superstitious rumors about its potentially demonic origins;

it was first hair, infant hair, and would probably fall out in a week or so to be replaced with the girl's actual color. Arianna had been born with a fuzz of coal black covering her scalp and within a fortnight it was gone, a month later replaced with the chestnut locks that would stay.

But Rapunzel's hair was fine and troublesome, prone to tangling in tiny baby knots that were a devil to get out (made worse by prodigious baby drool and baby spit-up, which even the most precious infant princesses produced).

The day of her baptism was marked out for one of great celebration across the kingdom. King Frederic, an amateur stargazer, noted that in the evening there would be a new moon; the night when the sky was blackest for lack of her light.

"We should send up *more* candle lanterns!" he declared. "We should fill the sky with them! To celebrate!"

A trade caravan from the East had introduced these wonders to the kingdom a few months before: brightly colored and painted paper lanterns that flew like clouds up into the sky when their wicks were lit. Frederic had bought the entire lot and begged them to come back with more.

(Also bought were fireworks, silk, tea, and a range of spices the castle cooks had never even heard of before—but quickly made great use of.)

Lanterns were distributed to everyone in the kingdom with instructions to light them from boats in the harbor as soon as the sun had set.

All the land was swept up in preparation for the night: garlands of flowers were hung from the houses; the *chanci* painted bright mandalas on the plazas in chalk. Musicians tuned and polished their instruments, everyone readied their best dresses and tabards, women braided their hair with brilliant white lilies that only sadly approximated the glow of the Sundrop Flower.

(Moondrop Flower.)

But little baby Rapunzel was not enjoying *her* preparations for the celebration.

She didn't mind wearing the snow-white christening gown that had been tatted from the finest silk by a dozen of the country's most skilled lace makers.

She didn't object to the rose water that was sprinkled on her chubby folds to keep her as sweet smelling as idiots imagined babies *should* be.

She didn't even object to the very careful trimming of her tiny fingernails so she wouldn't scratch her face.

What she hated was all the fussing with her hair.

"How can a newborn already have so many knots?" Nanna Bess wondered, holding Rapunzel close while the young maid Lettie tried to tease the tangles out with a silver

comb. Queen Arianna looked on with a smile, secretly rejoicing at the feisty screams and surprisingly strong kicks from her daughter. Fury meant *life*, which wasn't always guaranteed in the youngest. Fury meant a strong will—which was especially useful for girls and women and even queens, who had to fight for what was theirs.

King Frederic paced the room impatiently, constantly checking the work of the court painter, who was doing a quick sketch of the scene. Which would have been charming behavior in a new father—if only he hadn't also tried to have the poor artist sketch Rapunzel's first bath, Rapunzel's first lie-down in her royal bassinet, and even Rapunzel's first royal diaper change.

“Stay still, pretty thing!” Lettie pleaded, trying to gently hold the baby's head so she wouldn't be hurt by the beautiful comb.

“Easy there, love,” Nanna Bess said, dandling the infant a little on her hip.

“All right, just one more knot and we're done,” the maid said through gritted teeth.

She *might* have yanked the comb a little hard to get through it quickly. Rapunzel let out an angry cry and jerked her head, causing the tangle to get stuck on the comb.

“Oh, darling!” Lettie cried, putting her hand on the baby's poor red scalp.

Rapunzel's face also turned red. Beet red with infant hurt and pain. She opened her pretty pink lips wide and *howled*

. . . and the maidservant dropped dead.

The room was silent except for the infant princess crying, which really wasn't all that loud—she was a newborn, after all.

“What . . . ?” The normally silent Frederic spoke first.

One of the guards thought fast; he rushed over, dropped to a knee, and felt the maid's cheek. “She's already growing cold—call the physician, though I think it's too late.”

The other guard saluted and went shouting through the halls, demanding the summons of Signore Dottore Alzi, who treated the castle and staff.

“Rapunzel!” the queen cried, leaping up. Like any mother, confused and faced with violence, her first instinct was to grab her baby.

But Nanna Bess turned aside, clutching the baby close and holding her away from the queen.

“Your Majesty, no,” she said, her quick mind making sense of the situation faster than anyone else in the room—save, perhaps, the guard. “You must keep away.”

“Give me my child,” Arianna demanded, a bit of her

daughter's will bubbling up through her otherwise terrified black eyes.

"No, my queen," Bess said firmly. "There's something strange afoot here—you saw it. Lettie tugged Rapunzel's hair and now she is dead. In truth the babe seems to be calming now, but let me hold her until we know that it's safe."

Arianna started to move forward anyway—but Frederic held her back.

The artist continued sketching the scene: a bleak, silent room full of chaos and despair . . . and a rosy-cheeked baby, who was already gurgling and making content little noises to herself, the moment of hurt utterly forgotten.

The artist was *not* invited into the king's solar, where the scene of despair continued—though it was now tempered by thought and worry. Frederic and Arianna held each other close while their daughter slept nearby (in the bassinet that had been carved from rowan wood to keep her safe from bad fairies). Signore Dottore Alzi was there, as was the castle priest, and Nanna Bess, and the guard who had discovered that Lettie was dead.

"I'm inclined to think it was an unhappy accident," said the doctor tiredly. He had wire glasses and kind eyes.

“Perhaps this maid had a heart condition, or something in her brain. The stress of the moment caused the blood and humors in her body to boil and agitate until her weak condition could bear it no more.”

“You think *that* was the first time she experienced stress?” Nanna Bess shot back. “Tell me, Signore, have you ever actually talked to a pretty young maid from a poor family?”

The doctor shrugged. He didn’t have an answer.

“The devil is at work here,” the priest said. “This is what comes from relying on magic plants and witchery to save you, and not the word of God.”

King Frederic rubbed his prodigious brow tiredly and squeezed Arianna’s shoulder, comforting her before she could react to this.

“You there, guard,” he commanded. “You’re the one who understood what was going on first, going over to the poor dead girl. Tell me exactly what you saw.”

Royal guard Justin Tregsborg (known as “Maximus” in the Roman fashion because of how he towered over his siblings) was young, but experienced enough not to show emotion. “Your Majesty, to my eyes it looked like the princess grew angry—and the maid immediately died. I saw nothing else save the fact that the maid was touching the baby, the baby’s hair to be exact, when it happened—but

Bess was holding the baby and lived. I could not tell you *how* it happened.”

“The princess’s *hair* . . .” Arianna slowly rose and went over to the bassinet. Rapunzel’s silver locks—still with that last knot—were spread out on the pillow around her, strange and, yes, unnatural in the child of two parents with hair as brown as the mane of a fine Arabian steed.

Witchy hair.

“Maybe it *was* the flower,” Signore Alzi mused. “Of course I don’t believe in such things—Arianna is a fine, healthy woman who probably recovered on her own. But let us suppose this Sundrop Flower was magical, and its essence was transferred to the queen upon her ingesting its infusion. Would it not follow that the baby too would consume its essence, as she ingests the food and drink her mother eats while bearing her?”

Arianna and Frederic exchanged a worried look. She put her hand without thought on her belly, now empty of its charge.

“A child cannot control her rage, Your Majesty,” the priest said gently. “Whether this is the work of the devil or Alzi’s ridiculous scientific ideas, if she has the power to kill she will do so again, thoughtlessly, as babes flail and squirm in their tantrums.”

Frederic tried to control his feelings by frowning and

thinking like a king, the way his father taught him, and his father before that.

“But what is there to be done? Do any of you actually have any *ideas*? Tregsburg?”

At this the guard looked uncomfortable. He had been raised deep in the hinterlands of this country, on the folklore of the people there. And now he wore the garb of any fairy-tale hunter or executioner who might be tasked to take a baby out and . . . deal with it in the woods.

“Sounds like she could present a credible danger and threat to you and the queen, Your Majesty,” he said reluctantly. “Or Nanna Bess, or anyone who tends her.”

Arianna stifled a sob.

Nanna Bess looked at the baby wistfully. “Think of it, though. A princess who lived with such powers . . . a queen . . . she’d be a right powerful ruler, wouldn’t she? That would be a sight.”

“She needs to be raised *safely*,” King Frederic said, repeating aloud the only thought that was clear or made any sense in his head.

“Safe for her—*and* everyone else,” Alzi added quickly.

“In a safe, godly community. With nuns,” the priest suggested.

“Maybe by someone who knows about these sorts of things,” the guard disagreed as politely as possible.

“She is *my child*,” Arianna cried. “I will go with her!”

“You are the queen, beg pardon, Your Majesty,” Bess said with a low curtsy. “You have a responsibility to many children besides yer own. A whole kingdom of children—and their parents, who need your leadership.”

“She’s not wrong,” Signore Alzi said.

“You are a shepherd to your people,” the priest said.

“Perhaps we could keep her nearby so you could visit,” King Frederic suggested . . . but in that suggestion was the note of finality in his thoughts on the matter. “Until she has grown out of such things . . . or has learned to control herself.”

Arianna glowered at him with her own unmagical fury. Then she wilted.

“Tregsborg—put the word out. *Secretly* this time,” King Frederic ordered. “To all the real goodwives and wit—uh, women, who have knowledge of these things. Dangerous magical things. Find one who will care for Rapunzel like her own child and teach her well, protecting her from the world and the world from her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Absolutely, Your Majesty.” The guard saluted.

“And what shall we say happened here?” the priest asked, indicating the baby—and the unseen, unmentioned, but unavoidable body of the maid.

“We will say she died trying to save the princess,” Signore Alzi suggested. “A noble act, but too late. A serpent or venomous lizard got them both.”

(Signore Alzi had happily fled the insidious courts of the Medici for the less scheming and poisonous land of this kingdom, but he had well learned the art of the lie, and the power of rumor and gossip.)

“Let it be done,” Frederic ordered.

Then he took his weeping Arianna in his arms, and held her tightly until night fell.

Mother Gothel

The assortment of goodwives, doctors, priests, and charlatans to choose from was much smaller this time because of the need for actual expertise on the matter, not just hearsay. When it came to magic, there was a very small—but very significant—difference between *belief* and *knowledge*. The average sort of hedge practitioner, the kind who silently wished for powers like the Sundrop Flower bestowed but in reality concocted useless love philters for starry-eyed teens (while dispensing reasonably good advice), just wouldn't do this time. Nor would those who read the fates in cards or those who could do tricks for kings, either.

Necromancers were right out.

It was down to a very slim selection indeed when, one dark evening, a cloaked, black-haired woman appeared like a fairy tale at the castle door. The guards unlocked and opened it, and she wasn't even paying attention; she was admiring the shadow of her—admittedly comely—body, cast large by the flames of the torches in the wall. She posed and tossed her head like a much younger maiden.

“Sorry. My little hut has absolutely terrible light,” she said with a winning smile. “Just tallow candles and sunshine to admire my girlish figure.”

Tregsborg was not drawn in by her smile, nor her beautiful full black hair, nor her large eyes. Yet he also did not have the sadly common prejudices of a peasant; he didn't care if she was from the Romi or the Judisce or the mountains or someplace south. There was just something . . . off about her. False.

Still, he ushered her in like all the others. She looked around at the tapestries, the suits of armor, the resident nobles' finery, with interested eyes—but a strange little smirk on her face. As if she thought it was all delightful yet largely unimportant: *How silly for the inhabitants to treasure such things!*

“Your Majesty,” the guard announced, “Mother Gothel.”

“*Sister* Gothel, really,” she corrected immediately.

“Not that I don’t yearn to be a mother to my own little babe someday, but . . . ‘mother’ just sounds so . . . *old*, doesn’t it?”

She remembered to curtsy only at the very last minute.

The king sat in his comfiest non-throne chair; Arianna was perched drawn and pale on a settee with one hand on the bassinet. Nanna Bess stood close by, one hand on her queen’s shoulder. The priest and the doctor lurked in the shadows.

“I’m so *delighted* the queen pulled through her ailments and delivered such a *beautiful* baby girl . . .” Gothel said, standing on her tiptoes to peep at the baby. “After the tragedy of not finding the Sundrop Flower . . .”

“But we did,” Frederic said, confused. So much so that he forgot the formal speech he had already recited a dozen times. “We found the flower, plucked it, and made the tea, and the queen drank it—and this is the cause of the problem, we believe.”

“Um, what, Your Majesty?” the woman asked, also confused. “The Sundrop Flower *can’t* have been picked! I still have . . . I mean, I feel like there would have been a *sign* or a portentous omen . . . I would have, uh, read it in the tea leaves. . . .”

“A royal celebration and minstrels proclaiming the magic of a healthy birth wasn’t enough?” Nanna Bess asked archly.

Ignoring her, Gothel went over to the baby. She gazed at the princess with greater interest and intrigue than before.

“Her hair . . .” she said slowly. “It’s silver. Not golden, like one would expect if she had drunken the essence of *golden petals*. And you’re sure it was the Sundrop Flower?”

“Yes, unless there is another shining blossom out there somewhere,” Signore Alzi interrupted impatiently.

Gothel remained silent.

“Here is the situation.” King Frederic pressed on. This was the hardest part of the ordeal; recounting again and again the story of what happened. Arianna turned and buried her head in Bess’s aprons like a child; the old woman put her arms around the queen like a mother.

Gothel said nothing, but her large eyes grew even wider as the king told the truth about Rapunzel and the death of Lettie.

When it was over, Gothel studied the baby a moment silently before she spoke.

“Such power . . .” she murmured. Her eyes narrowed in thought. “In the right . . . or wrong . . . hands . . . Some would pay for such a pretty little weapon, not lock her away. . . .”

“*What* did you just say?” Arianna demanded.

Gothel turned to face the king, a grim look on her face. “Sire, you are correct to be so concerned. The power of the

heavens is now terribly concentrated in the heart of such a . . . cutie-wootie little baby. She needs to be *protected*. But also kept safe from those who would use her for ill. Though it is a dangerous undertaking, I would be honored to take on such a burden as my own, and lift the responsibility from Your Majesty's shoulders."

"Rapunzel isn't a *burden*," Arianna said, fingers tightening on the bassinet. "She is an *infant*. She isn't a *responsibility*, she's a child."

"Your Majesty, one can tell you're an . . . excited new mother with all of the resources of an entire kingdom at your disposal," Gothel said with a curtsy and a wink at Nanna Bess. "*All* infants and children are both responsibilities and burdens. . . . It is why those of us who practice the arts often don't have time for them."

Bess didn't disagree but shifted uncomfortably at the familiar tone the goodwife took with her mistress.

"So you have never cared for a child before," King Frederic said.

"Oh, don't let these girlish looks deceive you," Gothel said, laughing and spinning coquettishly. "I am far older than I look and have lived a long hard life before now. My experiences are too many to list."

"That's not answering the question," Signore Alzi pointed out.

“Here,” Gothel said in answer, turning to the baby and leaning over her.

She stroked Rapunzel on the cheek and murmured soft words . . . and then lifted her up.

Everyone in the room gasped.

But the baby, first woken in surprise by a stranger, immediately saw she was in no danger. She tried to lift her head off Gothel’s shoulder to get a look around. When she saw her mother, she relaxed, snuggling back down.

“You see now?” Gothel cooed quietly, bouncing the baby a little. “I’m quite good with little ones. And my knowledge of things like the Sundrop Flower will allow me to raise her safely, away from people, where she can hurt no one.”

“Until she has grown out of it,” Arianna said, carefully repeating what Frederic had said before, as exact and superstitious as a child afraid of being cheated out of a promise. “Or she is old enough to control herself.”

“Ah, Your Majesty, I’m afraid where this sort of thing is involved *growing out of it* isn’t a question,” Gothel said, making her lips purse sadly. “Her powers will grow and become even more, ah, powerful. Until she is deadly just to be near—you won’t even have to be touching her.”

“No!” Arianna cried, standing up, clenching her fists.

"Afraid so," Gothel said with a sigh. "Honestly, it's a ridiculously dangerous thing for me to take on. You hear about it all the time in the circles I travel in. Someone takes in a cursed foundling, then dies at its hands. . . . I probably wouldn't even bother unless I thought I would be compensated enough for my family to be taken care of in the probable event of my accidental death."

"Of course," the king said, missing Tregsburg's poor attempt to not roll his eyes. "We will provide for you—and your family, in the event of your . . . Do you really think she would do that?"

"No," Arianna whispered, gazing at Rapunzel, who looked no more dangerous than any sleeping babe.

"Where do you live, Gothel?" the king asked, trying to sound businesslike. But his eyes were bright with tears.

"Oh, you know, a little hut in the Deiber River Valley," Gothel said carelessly. "Maybe not the best place for such a dangerous—er, pretty little princess. But I know *just* the spot. A hidden place in a beautiful dell, full of wildflowers and soft grasses. An ancient place, a ruined fort . . . with the sort of, ah, keep one might need to protect the darling."

"Where is it?" Tregsburg demanded.

"Maybe it's best not to tell. Kidnappings and ransom are common with the little ladies of the court, aren't they? And what if the people revolt and want to destroy her?"

“But I want to *see* her!” Arianna said, standing up. “I want to see her grow up! Even if I can’t . . . *be* with her.”

“We could of course arrange visits,” Gothel said soothingly. “But maybe, for her—and your—peace of mind, without her knowing about it. At least at first. I’ll let you in and you can gaze at her to your heart’s delight.”

“You should leave tonight,” Frederic declared. “Alzi—fetch the treasurer. We must make sure our child lacks for nothing and provide her with the lifestyle we cannot oversee ourselves.”

“You’re too kind, Your Majesty,” Gothel said, curtsying with the baby still on her shoulder.

“Tonight . . .” Arianna said—with no tears, for they had already been used up.

A layette was quickly assembled and packed. Blankets and gowns and snuggly hats and the softest diapers were folded into trunks. A handsome, gentle donkey was saddled up with a basket for the baby and a cart for the provisions—and gold.

Although the guards tried to stop her, Queen Arianna would not be held back from giving her princess a final kiss.

“We are doing the right thing,” Frederic said, holding her shoulders.

“For the kingdom, maybe,” Arianna said. “Maybe for

our own safety. But *not* for my baby. Do not for a moment fool yourself into thinking that.”

And so Mother Gothel set out like a thief in the night, the princess tucked in safely for the journey.

The next day the story was made public of the sudden and terrible death of Rapunzel, and the brave maid who had tried to save her from a venomous serpent. All who had actually been in the room at the time were sworn to secrecy. The entire kingdom mourned for a fortnight, and the ceremonies ended with the release of the sky lanterns as a tribute to the poor deceased princess. The king declared that they would do it every year to mark the anniversary of her death.

Life gradually returned to normal for the kingdom . . . but not for its king and queen, who were still kind and fair, but now sad and prone to silence.

A Fairy-Tale Interruption

Late one night, not too long after these events, a light but decisive knock sounded upon the gatehouse of the castle. A guard opened the door to find an old woman waiting patiently there. She was wrapped in layer upon layer of undyed wool robes and shawls, and grasped a walking staff made from the gnarled root of a tree in her gnarled hands. Her hair was long, swirled in black and white, and bound up in braids around her head. Though her face was pouchy and cheeks and nose red with the cold, she peered up into the guard's face with bright, interested black eyes.

"I'm here about the baby?" she said.

The guard blinked at her in surprise for a moment and then went and fetched his superior. Corporal Tregsborg

(promoted because of his calm—and quiet—handling of the princess situation) ushered the old woman inside quickly, taking her to a small side room where they could talk and not be heard.

“That crisis is over,” he told her. “We found a caretaker for the princess weeks ago—how is it you are just coming here *now*?”

“Oh, I live in the woods and rarely hear the news, and when I *do* hear it, I often forget it for a day or two,” the woman said, not really apologizing. “There’s always something else to take my attention . . . mostly the goats, of course. Or baby dormice who need tending, a brownie that got lost, a patch of ground that was forgotten by spring . . . you know.”

Tregsburg did *not* know. What he did know was that this sort of thing really wasn’t in his job description *or* worldview, and he wished it would all be tidied up—by someone else—and sooner rather than later. He had a servant bring the woman a nice bowl of broth and a tankard of cider, and if she were an angel or a sorceress in disguise, he felt that he had done all that was right by her.

She happily tucked into the soup . . . and grew chatty, to the corporal’s dismay.

“Well, as long as I’m here, pray could you tell me what the truth of the matter is? Your messenger made it sound urgent, and here I am, miles away from my cozy hut.”

"I am sworn to secrecy on the matter, which has now been attended to."

"Ah, yes, but if I had been here on time you *would* have told me. And anyway you could take my tongue out with a single lop of that fancy steel sword of yours—so humor an old lady. You found the Sundrop Flower, you fed it to the queen, she grew healthy and had a baby girl, and—then what?"

The corporal sighed and told her what happened.

The old woman frowned.

"*Killed* the poor maid? And the baby had silver hair, you say? That is not the mark of the Sundrop Flower, nor its power. Either it was a rogue mushroom the queen ate instead, or, by my guess, the bloom of the Moondrop."

Tregsburg looked at her in dismay, his mind racing. This goodwife was not a tenth as comely as Gothel . . . but spoke candidly and certainly, like she actually knew of these mystical things. The other woman, now that he thought about it, had not said much at all about the flower or the strangeness of the situation. She had just taken the baby—and left.

"Where is the princess now?" the woman asked interestedly, sipping the broth as if this were gossip at a pub.

"The king and queen found a goodwife who arrived *on time* and promised to care for her safely."

“Hm. And then you made all this fuss about the princess dying to hide what really happened?” she asked, waving her spoon around. There was still black crepe hung here and there throughout the castle, though outside it the people of the kingdom were slowly taking the bunting down and continuing with their lives. “Strange choice. Not *wrong*, just . . . not what I would have done. But I choose to live in the woods and talk to plants. Say, this is a *nice* spoon,” she said, suddenly looking at it in her hand. “Well balanced. *Metal*. So who is this goodwife who took her?”

Tregsborg debated secrecy for a moment. But the old woman already knew most of the story at this point—and seemed to have guessed the rest. She might have seemed like a daft old hermit, yet her mind was sharp.

“Mother Gothel,” he finally admitted.

“Never heard of her,” the old woman said with a shrug. “There was a family of Gothels who lived . . . oh, a while ago, on the other side of the river. . . . But no goodwives among them.”

The corporal tried not to let his frustration show. It seemed that a terrible mistake had been made—but what was done was done, and not by his choice. The kingdom had already gone through enough turmoil and tragedy. And if Queen Arianna suddenly thought she had made a bad choice, or Frederic . . . the revelation of this would kill

them. And despite all else, the Gothel woman seemed a good enough nurse.

“Well, nothing for me here now, I guess,” the goodwife said. She had finished her soup and was looking around a little uncomfortably. “I sort of . . . you know, I sort of was looking forward to having a baby. I had one once—a long time ago. He died before his second birthday. . . . It would be nice to have some bright eyes and a merry laugh around the house. I was thinking about it all the way here. Where I’d put her bed, the best herbs to ward off pox, how to get help from the river spirits . . .”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Tregsborg said, meaning it. “I’m sorry for many, many things here. But there is nothing more to be done. May I find someone to take you by cart as far as you need, back to your home? Some supplies for the way, perhaps?”

“Oh, you’re too kind,” she said with a smile and a wink. “Nice *and* quite a build. If I were younger, laddie . . . But I think I’ll spend some time in the capital, as long as I’ve made the trip. See the sights, visit a few old trees, buy some trinkets. Hey, can I keep the spoon?”

The guard blinked at the sudden change in conversation.

“What? I suppose. If you must. A gift from King Frederic, for your time.”

“Lovely, just lovely,” she said with a sigh, gazing at its

owl. “*Nice* workmanship. Solid. All right then, young man, just see me to the door and I’ll be on my way.”

“At once, Mother,” he said with a bow.

The old woman rose carefully, holding her new prize, and waddled off toward the exit.

“Oh, you might want to tell whoever is taking such lovely care of those bellflowers on the ledge there that a cold snap is coming, three days hence—an untimely freeze,” she called over her shoulder as she left. “She should take them in.”

“But it’s June!” Tregsburg said.

And that was the last he saw of her for many a year.

But in three days the bellflowers were dead, their pale blue blossoms frozen and thawed to pastel-colored tissue that melted in the rain.