

Once Upon A Time

by Rabia Gale

I am a fraud. I don't belong in this silk and goose-down prison. I don't deserve lacy undergarments, breakfast in bed, curtsies and bows.

By rights, I should be scrubbing the flagstones of the castle courtyard.

You see, I am no princess. I come from a long line of servants, honest and hardworking, never looking any higher than the buckets and brooms that were their duty and birthright. Mother's told me all the stories; of back-breaking labors and the idiosyncrasies of past mistresses. Hauling buckets of water for perfume-scented hot baths. Carrying big baskets of wet sheets. Polishing silver and scouring pots. Lady C-- kept her servants up late after her lavish dinner parties to count the silverware (and woe betide the household if even a single sugar spoon was missing!). Mistress B-- wore a mask of mud and egg yolk every night ("What a frightful thing to sleep next to! No wonder her husband traveled so much.") and Baroness O-- owned eleven monkeys and three dogs ("All of them slept on her bed. It was a big bed, my dear, but there are limits.").

My line seemed doomed to servitude, but my mother changed all that. She told her tales with a dispassionate, flippant air, as if they happened to someone else a very long time ago. After all, she had left it all behind for...

You must know the stories. The clock striking midnight. The beautiful masked woman fleeing the ball, foamy skirts swirling around her, stumbling down the steps of the palace. Leaving a sparkly slipper behind.

That was my mother. And what the stories don't tell you is that the reason for her hasty departure had more to do with the purloined rings and watches in her reticule than any conditions of a magic spell.

Yes, my mother discovered that a pretty dress, a scrap of silk over her face and a winsome smile was a passport into even the most strongly-guarded bastion of wealth. She flitted amidst the dancing and flirting and the flowing champagne, slipping jewels off

the unwary and drunk, teasing wallets out of pockets. Once she escaped with a rolled-up painting under her skirts—taken just because she liked it. The artist then obliged her by dying and becoming posthumously famous. Mother still keeps that slightly-worn canvas in every bedroom she's ever occupied.

Her raids on balls ended after she twisted her ankle skittering down palace steps. She hobbled to the river and threw herself aboard a barge ("darling, it *stank* of manure") with a besotted prince in pursuit. My mother then turned her considerable aptitude for intrigue to other schemes.

Once, she spent three nights in the palace of an avaricious and not-very-clever king, spinning straw into gold. The straw she shoved under the beds of empty guest chambers; the gold she "borrowed" from the king's own treasure rooms. He got all the gold back, of course, minus the twenty percent she took as commission. Unfortunately, one of the king's ministers caught on to my mother's strategy and she was never able to safely duplicate it.

So, Mother waited for gullible princes and ambitious younger sons to find *her*. She secured the services of a clan of sturdy bearded midgets from a traveling circus and retired to a long-abandoned keep in a forest. Soon stories started to circulate about a long-forgotten kingdom and an enchanted sleeping princess. Many adventurers wound their way to the forest, found a beautiful sleeping woman (never once pausing to wonder why her clothes were so clean and her hair freshly-shampooed), and broke her enchantment. They had some kind of interaction—Mother never elaborated on that part—but they went away curiously deprived of valuables and unable to remember exactly what had transpired. That performance lasted until one of Mother's visitors, who had obviously paid attention to his Latin tutors, realized exactly what the "tea from Lethe" she served him was.

Mother never minded being discovered—provided that she managed to escape the wrath of her victims. It was all part of the game. Money was not important to her; it flowed out of her hands as easily as it dropped into them. Mother was as likely to spend a gold coin on a bunch of bedewed daisies sold by a little girl as she was to pick the pocket of the Town Mayor even as he danced with her.

Somewhere along the way, Mother acquired me. She has tales of pregnancy woes aplenty, but she also speaks of finding me in a flower bed or buying me off a black-toothed hag in an alley. She never told me who my father is.

I hoped it was not the dim-witted straw-enriched king.

I made a part for myself in Mother's schemes at an early age. While Mother was batting her eyelashes at dukes and barons, I was luring their young progeny into forests with promises of houses made of candy. When they were hopelessly lost and scared, they bought my guide services out of the forest with silver buttons, glittering hairclips, and once (to my great delight) a fat, dappled pony. Mother made me give the pony back, saying that if you kill the chicken, you won't get eggs. I didn't know what she meant until she made off with a diamond necklace belonging to the pony's owner's mother. She got me *two* ponies after that, and I was a blissfully happy child until we had to leave them behind in one of our frequent mad scrambles to leave town.

As I grew older, I played page boy and postillion, announcing Lady This or Duchess That—whatever alibi my mother had picked for the occasion. I was happy until the day Mother caught my grimy chin, looked me up and down (I admit I was getting curves) and decided that pickpocketing, a smattering of a dozen languages (including some colorful slang) and an aptitude for negotiating the best deals out of tightfisted tradesmen was an inadequate education. She promptly retired us to the country, despite my sulks and foot-dragging, and my formal training began.

Mother was a ruthless teacher. She expected me to know—and want to know—everything she did, and that ranged from the latest fashions to classical languages to the finer points of art appreciation. For the first time, I began to appreciate the depth of my mother's knowledge. She was at home as easily with a group of scullery maids as at a duchess' dinner party. In spite of myself, I became fascinated with books and learning, took up chess and, I confess, became vain about my hair.

It was probably because we had not moved in several years that he found us. Mother was putting jams away on a golden late-summer afternoon; I lounged on a window seat, ostensibly reading a treatise on etiquette, but really basking in the sunshine warming my neck and back. Normally my comfortable pose would've earned me a stern look, but even Mother was mellow that day. She was dressed well as

always, in a flower-patterned muslin complete with lacy cuffs, but had foregone shoes and stockings. Her bare feet padded to and fro, her skirts swished against her legs, her humming filled my ears, and then a shadow lay across our threshold.

Mother paused. I heard the suck of her indrawn breath. I blinked, screwing my eyes to make out the stranger's features. That he was tall and male was all I could tell until he spoke.

"Elise." A rich voice, like the grain of seasoned oak. I cocked my head. Mother had used many names—Marguerite was the most common—but I had never heard of it.

Mother's hands dropped to her sides, fluttering white in the sudden shadow. A sigh escaped her. Her shoulders relaxed as if something she had been half-hoping, half-dreading had finally come to pass and she could finally stop turning it over and over in her mind. "Gervain."

The man stepped into our cottage and I saw that he had the same dark eyes with the skeptically-arched eyebrows above them that looked back at me in the mirror every day. My lips curved, but I dared not make a noise.

"I dug through all those bins of manure on that barge," he said. A somber kind of laughter touched his eyes. "With my own hands. My guards looked askance at me." I suspected his smile would be as crooked as my own.

"Your bare hands?" said Mother. "How romantic of you, Gervain."

"Oh no." I was right about his smile. "I wore gloves. Not even for you, Elise, would I go throw muck with bare hands."

They stood where they were, not moving closer, but a long look passed between them and I had to look away. Some things aren't meant to be shared with third parties.

"I'm afraid I don't have much to offer you now that I have found you. You were right about Florian. He usurped the throne a year after you left. He poisoned my father and my older brother and made it appear that I was to blame. I've been a fugitive ever since. That's why it's taken me so long to find you. I had to work so I could eat."

Mother gave a ladylike snort. I knew that snort; it meant "you obviously didn't try hard enough."

My father chuckled. "I lack your—ah—superior skills of survival, Elise."

Mother sighed. "I know. I've been trying to drum them into Katherine's head but I have to contend with that trusting nature she inherited from you." I sat up indignantly and my father threw me a look. It wasn't a long look, but it was warm and laughing and full of shared confidence. I relaxed. We would make our introductions later. If he'd been tracking Mother that long, he probably knew—or had guessed—about me. I doubted he was as incompetent as he made himself out to be.

Mother continued, "As for being a prince without a country... well, we can arrange that. Things are not impossible." The gleam in her eye said that she had been out of the game too long. It was time to get back into it with some grand scheme.

They left a week later for a northern kingdom with a ruler who had no direct heir. Mother would no doubt charm the old man into seeing Gervain's princely qualities as perfectly suited to his kingdom. I wasn't upset at being left behind. Mother's remark about my trusting nature had nettled me.

I was eighteen. Now it was my turn to prove myself.

And that's how I found myself climbing into the wizard's tower in search of something more rare and precious than gold and jewels and fine art. Magic.

And that's where I learned why Mother had so wisely given all things magical a wide berth. The tower may have been abandoned, but that ancient wizard's potent defenses still lingered. I was trapped in there for several months, pacing the upper floor, able to see out the windows, but without any means to scale the unnaturally smooth walls. I found some promising old jars in a cupboard, but a cautious taste test confirmed that most were mustards and preserves. I had no need of food or water; the magic that saturated the tower kept me alive. I had no desire to eat centuries-old raspberry jam.

I found the jar at the back of the cupboard, cryptically labeled *Hair*.

Inside it was amber oil, like liquid sunshine. The fragrance of a thousand roses wafted into my nostrils.

I couldn't resist. I dipped my fingers in the oil and massaged it into my scalp. When I climbed into the old-fashioned iron bed--with creaky springs and sagging mattress--that night, I felt as if I were going to sleep in a summer garden.

I woke up the next morning to find that my hair was six inches longer.

It took me ten days and all of the oil to grow my hair long enough to reach the ground from the window. It pained me to cut it off; I knew it would never be as long and thick and lustrous again. However, I was not resigned to life in the tower kept company by my lovely hair. I fashioned the hair into a rope, tied it to the bedpost and let it out the window.

Then you showed up.

I know you think I'm a princess, a victim of magic. It was fun to pretend for a little while, but I like you too much to keep up the lie. Even if telling you the truth means giving you up. You see, I'm just a common thief, daughter to a most *uncommon* thief, but a thief nonetheless. And even though the ivory combs and lavender-scented baths and maids to brush my hair a hundred times every night *are* nice, they can't replace the headiness of danger in every flirtation, the moonlight prowls on city rooftops, the laughter and the madness and the danger.

Farewell, prince. I am just an aberration in your otherwise comfortable life. I wouldn't wish you to remember me much--and I'm sure you will be angry when you do--but maybe when you're an old doting grandfather you can sit your grandbabies on your knee and tell them about your youthful follies.

Of course those words would never be written. I spent all evening composing my missive, to the detriment of several quill pins and much crumpling and blotting of paper. My final farewell message was too stiff and too formal, only a few lines long, but time was running out. It would have to do.

I left.

"Katherine." I spun around. The horse I was saddling--Jester was his name--trod on my foot. I squeaked.

Kel stepped out of the shadows, arm outstretched as if to help. I forestalled him by limping out of the way, keeping Jester's bulk between us.

"I left you a note."

He stopped. His face was grim, his eyes watchful. Seen in the dim light of the brazier, he looked older, more world-weary, more *interesting*. "I saw it."

"Then what are you doing here?" I grumbled. "I've said what I wanted to say." *Don't say anything that might make me change my mind, please!*

His eyebrows arched. "You wanted to say stock phrases from a romance novel? Don't I deserve some originality, a glimmer of true feeling?"

My chest swelled in indignation. That note had taken me all evening to compose. "I'm very sensible of the honor you do me, sir, but I cannot and *will* not turn myself into a silk-stocking and rouge-paint princess and you'd do better to..."

"Katherine. I'm not a prince."

"... find yourself some pedigreed roses-and-cream noblewoman." My ears finally got my mind's attention. "You're not a prince?"

"No. I'm not."

"But everyone keeps telling me how they've known you forever, that you're Prince Thaddeus' best friend." I emerged from behind Jester. "Who *are* you, then?"

He coughed. "Thad and I were at school together. He used to invite me home for summer vacation and that first time we thought it would be a lark if I pretended to be a foreign prince. Everyone here swallowed the story, and we've been keeping up the pretence ever since. Don't look at me like that, Katherine"—(by which he meant the you're-a-dead-skunk-glare I'd turned on him)—"you looked so horrified when I made that remark about you being a princess back in the tower that I couldn't resist teasing you a bit."

"A bit?" I marched over to him and poked a finger into his chest. "Hunting parties. Dances. Fancy dress fittings. Fluttering maids. Obsequious servants." Each item punctuated by a jab. "For *ten* days."

An awful thought dawned on me. "And all those protestations of undying love? The poetry and pretty speeches? All false? All a *prank*?" I'd stab him with my eating-knife and bury him in Jester's bedding. No one would notice for a few hours and by then I'd be long gone...

"Never, Katherine." He caught my hand and held it in both of his. "I may not be a dissolute foreign prince, but I did fall in love with a beautiful local lady and I do want to

marry her." The smile he gave me was twisted and uncertain, unlike the easy dazzling one he had flashed at me the first time we'd met. I'd almost clonked him on the head with a frying pan, that time.

"Humpf," I said, eloquently. "If you're not a bored prince, then what were you doing in that tower?"

"I'm a finder of... lost things." He looked embarrassed. "Your mother sent me."

"My mother?" There I was, echoing again. I probably looked like a fish, too, all gaping mouth and bulging round eyes. "She's supposed to be in the uncivilized north somewhere, getting Father a kingdom!"

Laughter lurked in his eyes. "She is. She wanted me to keep an eye on you. She was afraid you were going to get yourself into trouble."

I snorted. "I was about to get myself out of trouble when you arrived on the scene." If Mother had sent him, he must meet her very high standards.

He bowed. "Resourceful like your mother. The apple does not fall far from the tree."

I punched his arm lightly. "Now that you've had your fun and played your prank, can we *leave* already?"

"With pleasure." He knelt and held out his cupped hands to help me mount Jester. I jumped on, light-headed with relief and gladness.

We arrived in the capital several weeks later, after a detour to a priest and a short honeymoon spent *acquiring* a wizard's staff. Kel and I rode through the snow-crusted streets and I wondered idly how long it had taken Mother to convince the King of Father's suitability as heir.

"The Princess is in the Red Chamber." The steward bowed and led me down a red-carpeted corridor. Whitewashed walls, brocade draperies over deep windows, portraits of aristocratic ancestors in suitably ornate gilt frames. Mother had chosen well.

The Red Chamber turned out to be decorated in blues and golds, freshly-painted and airy. I blinked in the sudden flood of golden light from the tall windows, nearly deafened by chirping canaries.

"Hush, Niobe, hush, Andromeda." I made out my mother's form, head impossibly golden and haloed, as she covered each cage, and one by one the birds stopped chirping.

"Thank God." My father's voice, from one of the blue-upholstered chairs. "Your move, sir."

A snort from the other side of the chess table. "Ha, you thought I didn't see you move that rook, youngling? How about this?"

"Katherine." Mother held out her arms and caught me in a warm embrace. I stiffened, then relaxed. Mother was not given to displays of affection.

"Father, come meet your granddaughter." Father? Granddaughter? Confused, I let Mother guide me over to the third person in the room--an older gentleman with piercing blue eyes, and a full head of thick grey hair. A well-groomed beard jutted out from his chin. On his chest was a thick medallion shaped like a sunburst.

I curtsied. "Your Majesty."

The King surveyed me for a moment. "She doesn't take much after you, Marguerite. Thank God for that. I can only take one girlhood like yours."

I gave Mother an indignant look. To put Father's case forward was one thing, but to masquerade as a missing heir!

Mother wore a slight, almost apologetic smile. "Yes, I was a very troublesome daughter. And you were a stubborn tyrant of a father. Aren't you glad that we spent all these years apart, so that we could meet as mellowed adults and actually get to know each other?"

The King snorted. "You mean to say now that I'm in my dotage, I would welcome you with open arms. You are sadly mistaken, Marguerite. It's all for this good fellow you've somehow ensnared, and this granddaughter of mine. Someone has to protect them from you."

"Of course." Mother and the King looked at each other, well-satisfied, understanding each other. Father looked on, gravely, but when he caught me staring he gave me a quick wink.

Mother, a princess? What about those stories of drudgery and dashes in the moonlight? I glanced at Mother and thought that if I didn't ask now, I'd never get a straight answer.

"Mother. Explain, please." I kept my tone polite, but firm.

Mother started. Father and the King--Grandfather, I suppose--chuckled.

"Very well." Mother sighed. "Pull up that ottoman, Katherine and sit. This may take awhile." I did so, eyes on Mother's face.

She looked away, briefly, pulling her thoughts together.

Then she began, softly, a little uncertain, "Once upon a time, there was a little girl who had everything she could possibly want--fine clothes, as much chocolate cake as her governess would let her eat, a fat dappled pony, a library full of fine books. Everything--except adventure...."

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