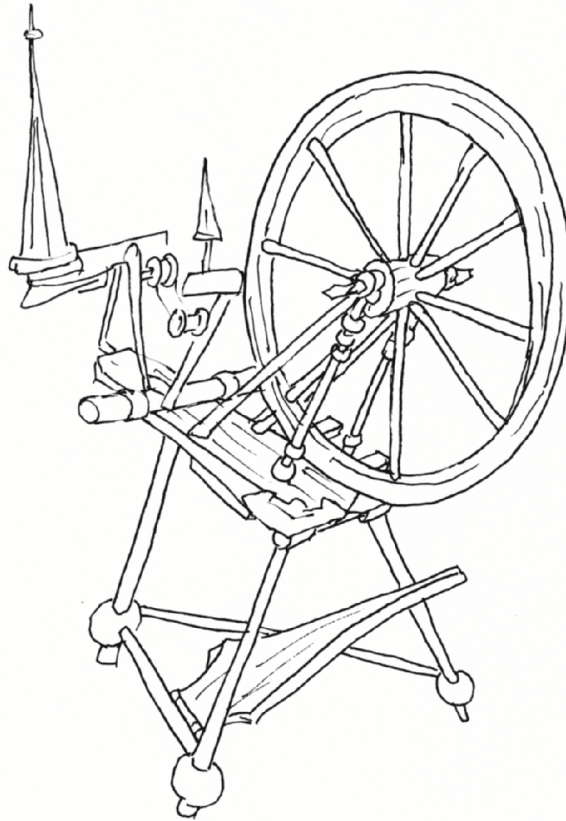


## Rumpelstiltskin



The smell of straw, and the sound of a woman weeping. *And where have I been summoned now?*

"You wished for something." I say sharply to her, and she jumps up and spins around, wide-eyed, red-eyed.

"Stay away! What are you?!" she squeaks, and backs away, stumbling and falling on the straw. Straw, straw, all around.

I laugh, and look about. There is a spinning wheel in the corner, and a heavy door behind my back. "Well?" I ask, "What wished ye for? I haven't got all day!"

"How did you get in here?" she asks, all aflutter, scrambling up the mountain of straw till she is well up beneath the rafters. "The door is locked! The door was locked!" she repeats.

I eye the door. Very solid. Iron bits. I don't try to open it. I don't hold with doors. "Aye, so it's locked it is." I agree. "But pardon my saying so, you're being a most ungracious host, to invite me here, and then run away like a frightened mouse."

She stares at me, head sidey-ways, eyes wide.

"You wished for me, and here I am." I say.

"No..." she says slowly. "No..."

"Yes, indeed you did." I say.

"I didn't wish for you!" she screams. "Go away! That's not what I meant! That's not what I meant at all!"

"Not what you meant? What did you mean then?"

She trembles, poor thing, but she answers. "I... I wished that a Faerie would come and save me..."

I laugh. "And what do you think I be?"

"You're not a Faerie!" she yells, "You're a Daemon! Go away!"

"Well, there's no cause for calling names," I say. "Do you wish me to save you or not?"

And she is quiet for a moment, sinking into the straw as she is, red eyes, dress all covered with chaff, what a sight! And then she says. "No. Go away. I'll not lose my soul to save my life."

How can I help but to laugh again, "I never said a word about your soul, girl. And I wouldn't want it anyway. I've no use for such things."

And again she is silent, sinking, sliding now, slowly down the hill of straw. And she says, "You're not a Daemon then?" she asks, scared, certainly.

"Nothing of the sort!" I reassure her. "Genuine Faerie, Highland Kobold, of the Unseelie Court. Never work for souls... though I won't say I work for free."

"What do you work for then?" she says, letting herself slide the rest of the way back to the floor.

Light glints off the necklace around her neck. Silver, little green stone. She sees my eyes, and grabs it in her hand. "My necklace?" She asks.

"Such a little trinket, for saving you... saving your life is it?" I laugh.

She looks at the spinning wheel, and she looks at her necklace. "Yes. My life." she says. "Just the necklace? Nothing more? You'll not curse me or hex me, or magic me in any way?"

"Nothing more. No tricks, Not a drop of magic will touch your skin."

She slowly reaches back to unfasten the chain.

And with a snap in the air and the crisp smell of silver, the necklace is in my hand, and she jumps, feeling it vanish from behind her fingers, and I laugh to see her look about her and feel her neck before she sees it hanging from my hand.

"Nothing more." I say, tucking the necklace into my waistcoat pocket. "Now, you'll be telling me what I'm to be saving your life from?"

"The King," she says, pointing to the locked door, "He locked me in here, and said he would kill me in the morning if I fail to spin this straw into gold."

"How delightful, how impossible! Spinning straw into gold, you say?" I say, dancing about.

I skip across the room, and sit promptly at the spinning wheel.

"What are you doing?" she asks, "Aren't you going to spirit me away to safety? You have my necklace, so save me!"

"I **am** saving you, impatient girl!" I say, "Now bring me an armful of straw! Haste now!"

"Are you teasing me?" she says, angry now, "Whisk me away home! I live above the big mill down the river."

So full of demands after they have payed, they always are. "You specifically requested not to be magicked." I remind her softly, "Now who's the Fairie, you or me? I'll save you how I see fit. Bring me that straw now!"

And she brings it, eyes burning, thinking I have deceived her no doubt, but now I spin, Spinning, spinning, Round and round, Gold of Grass to Gold of Ground.

And she touches the spindle. "Gold!" she says, like it should be a surprise.

"Of course!" I cackle, "What did you think I would spin it into, Chocolate? More straw now!"

And she brings me more, and I spin it, and she watches the golden thread in awe. Her anger is gone now, gone the way of her fear, now only wonder glitters in her eyes.

"Tell me now, girl," I ask while I spin, "What sort of mad King locks up poor maidens and threatens them with death for not being able to spin straw into gold?"

"It's my father's fault," she explains, bringing more straw. "He is a liar and a braggart. The King was a-hunting in the forest near my home, and he stopped at my father's mill, and my father, to make himself seem grand, told the King that I, his daughter, could spin straw into gold."

I let fall another bobbin of gold beside the spinning wheel, and I laugh.

"So," she continues, "The King sent his men to seize me, and brought me back here, and locked me in this room, and promised to kill me in the morning, to teach my father a lesson for telling such prideful lies."

"And won't they both be so surprised," I ask, "When the dawn shows that there was no lie at all!"

Straw to Gold, the whole night through, and by break of dawn the girl is dancing with joy, amidst the glitter of a King's ransom, and I spin the last strand of straw, and I crack my knuckles, and I stand, and--

\* \* \* \* \*

-- I am home again, in my open-house on the high-hill. A job well done. I withdraw the silver necklace from my pocket, admire it, and hang it on a low-branch of my jewelry-tree, with all the others.

I walk a while amongst my gallery of mirrors, and then down the dark stair to take my sleep before the sun is high.

\* \* \* \* \*

The smell of straw, the smell of straw. *And where have I been summoned now?*

"Oh! I didn't think you would come!" says a voice, I know this voice, it is the straw-to-gold girl again.

"Why have you wished me back?" I ask.

She stands beside the spinning wheel, straw all around, but more of it now, the room is a different one, bigger. Much bigger. "I'm so glad you came! I was so worried that you wouldn't. I was half afraid I had dreamed you-- but that is impossible... the gold..."

"Was the gold not satisfactory?" I ask. "My gold is real," I say. "No pixie-gold that turns to dust at sunset. Real gold."

"Yes!" she says, wringing her hands together, "The King was shocked, shocked and delighted. He demanded more! He says if I do not spin all this straw into gold by morning, he will have me killed!"

"And you wish for me to save you again?" I smile.

"Won't you?" she asks, anxious.

"I will, I will", say I, "But first you must give me something of value."

"But I have nothing more!" she cries, tears now, "You have already taken my necklace, and now I have nothing!"

"I think perhaps you do have something," I say, for I can smell the scent of a little precious thing, behind the scent of the straw.

"How do you know that?" she says slowly.

"No payment, no Faerie Magic." I say, and turn my back.

"Oh..." she sighs, and when I turn again she is holding it.

"Show me." I say.

She opens her hand, saying, "But you can't take this from me! It was my Mother's!"

Light glints from the golden ring in her hand.

"It will do nicely," I say.

"But no!" she says, snapping her hand shut again. "It was my Mother's and my Grandmother's before her, and my Great-grandmother's before that!"

"It will do nicely," I repeat.

"Why do you need gold!?" she asks, angry. "You can make gold from straw! You can have all the gold you want! Why do you need my little ring?!"

"You know nothing of magic, dear girl," I say with a smile. "I can only make gold for others, never for myself, and only when I am payed. Do you wish me to spin or not?"

She holds the ring tight in her hand, and her hand tight in her other hand, both before her face, but after a time she opens her hands, and looks at her ring, and says goodbye to it with her eyes, and snap! it is gone, and I pat my pocket, and sit down at the spinning wheel.

And with a tear in the corner of her eye, she brings me straw, and I spin.

But soon I see it will take too long. The room is vast, the straw is piled high. Night drains away. "Stand aside!" I tell her, and she does, and I make a whirlwind amongst the straw, and drive it through the spinning wheel, and gold thread like fiery spider's silk overflows the spindle, and piles up in heaps and mounds, and long before morning has come, the straw is all gone, and I too--

\* \* \* \* \*

-- Am gone back home, to my open-house on the high-hill. I breathe deep the fey air. From my pocket I take the little gold ring, rich with history and unspoken stories, and I carry it to my garden, and clear a place for it amongst the mushrooms, and bury it in the glistening soil with all the others.

I drink the night-tea from my pitcher-of-dew, and then down I go, down the dark stair to take my sleep before the sun is high.

\* \* \* \* \*

The smell of straw, *I know where I have been summoned now.*

She speaks right away, and is not afraid. "I knew you would come!" she clasps her hands together. "Please help me again!"

"And what will you pay me?" I ask. The room is so vast, so much straw. Was every barn in the kingdom emptied? An ocean of straw.

"The King says that if I spin all this straw into gold for him, he will make me his Queen!" She says. She is wearing a bright new dress, and her hair is neatly braided.

"He will make you his Queen?" I ask.

She picks up straw, and holds it out to me. The gleam of greed is in her eyes. It has taken her also.

"Before I saved your life." I say. "But now, does the threat of death still hang over you if you fail?"

She turns her head, and her eyes go distant. "I... I don't know... I imagine so..." she mumbles.

"And you wish to marry a man who would kill you?"

"No!" she says, but slowly. "I... No... I do not think he will kill me if I fail. But I won't fail! You will help me, yes!"

I walk around the spinning wheel. "I would help you if you could pay me, but

you have nothing left," I say. "You have given me your necklace, you have given me your ring. You have nothing left of value."

"But, I--"

"You have nothing!" I bark sharply.

"But when I am Queen, I can give you anything you desire! Riches! Treasure, far more than simple trinkets of jewelry!"

I regard her. She is anxious. Greed burns like a fire in her eyes.

"You have nothing to give me *now*." I say

"But I can give you much in the future!" She cries.

I laugh. "There is but one thing you will possess in the future which I would accept-- and this is the last time I will spin for you!"

"Name it. I will not ask you to spin again."

"After you are married to our dear King, you will bear a daughter. Give me the child."

Her mouth hangs open, and she gasps.

"Daemon!" she shouts, and points, accusingly. "You tricked me before, but now I know you for what you are! Never! I would never trade away the soul of my child, no, not even for my life!"

I roll on the floor in laughter, never-minding the straw in my beard. "Ho ho ho! Silly girl! I told you I am no Daemon! I want no souls! I asked for your child for her life, not for her soul! Her soul she may keep. She will need it when I am done with her life!"

"No... You monster!" she whispers.

I sit up and grin at her. I show her all my teeth. "I am no Daemon, I am a Faerie, but, I certainly never claimed to be a good Faerie!"

She sits in the straw. "What am I to do? What am I to do?"

"There, there." Say I soothingly, "I never meant to shock you. Did you suppose I mean to eat your firstborn girl?"

She turns her eye like a dagger upon me.

"I would treat her well, and raise her as my very own."

She says nothing.

"And it is only a chance," I lie. "Perhaps your firstborn will be a son, In which case I want him not, and shall free you of your debt. Or perhaps this King of yours is not so virile. Perhaps you will bear no child at all."

She drags her fingers through the straw, smell of straw, smell of straw.

I wait.

"Spin." She says at last. "I accept your game, and I will gamble."

"Wonderful!" I clap and dance, and I sit at the spinning wheel, and begin to spin, and she watches in silence.

And I move like the wind, and straw flies to gold, and now, because my price is so precious, I weave it as I spin, and tapestries of gold upon gold pile up upon

the floor.

And as the last straw flickers in the moonlight, she laughs, she laughs at me. "I will never bear a child!" she promises me.

I stand, and stretch, and smile. "Morning is not yet nigh. I still have time to spin this gold back into straw-- if I wish, but I will not, because a deal is a deal, and our arrangement stands, whatever happens."

And I snap my fingers, and she flinches, feeling the pain of the snap, and knowing that I mean what I say, and I am gone--

\* \* \* \* \*

--Back to my open-house on the high-hill, and I climb atop the roof, and watch the late stars, and then I go below and whisper to the old tree, and it begins to grow a baby's cradle for me, and down I go, down the dark stair, to take my sleep before the sun is high. I will sleep long this day, for she will not call on me again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three seasons pass, and I know it is time. Not because she calls me, oh no, she anti-calls to me, she wishes against me, but I need no wishes, her fervent desire to keep me away is a beacon to call me to her, to the Queen, in the nursery of her young princess.

"Go away!" She hisses, "Begone, evil creature!"

"I resent that, your highness," I say with a laugh, "though I told you I was not a good Faerie, neither did I say I was a bad one."

"You may not take her!" She cries.

I step close, and lean over the cradle. She tries to strike me, but she cannot.

"You know that I may take her." I say. "And indeed I shall."

"You shall not!" she says, and throws herself over the cradle. "It was not a fair trade! Not a fair trade. Take back your filthy Faerie gold!"

I smile broadly. "And do you still have it? How much of it has your husband spent?"

She scowls at me. "There is some of it left. Much of it."

"Ah, yes. And what did your King say, when you could not spin any more for him?"

Her eyes flash distant, but she returns to herself and says sharply, "He and I... came to an agreement."

"Wonderful," I say. "And you and I had an agreement also. Now I will be taking my daughter to her new home!" I brush her aside, and lift the child. The baby does not cry.

"Wait! Wait!" cries the mother, "Please! Give me a chance to save her! The trade was not fair! It was never fair!"

I hesitate, for it was indeed not entirely fair. I lied and gave her hope of a chance, when I saw with Faerie eyes that there was to be no chance in the matter.

Very well, I say. "Guess my name, and I will let you keep the child."

"Your name?" She asks.

"There is a powerful magic in names. If you speak my true name, I will have no further power over you."

"Give me time to think..." she says, lifting her child from me and holding it close.

"I give you three days, and I will return, and if you cannot tell me my name, the baby will be mine."

And I start to fade away, but she says, "Wait!", and I wait and listen, half-faded.

"Do you even know *my* name?" She asks.

"I need it not," I reply.

"My name is Lynn." she says, voice distant, eyes away. "Now they call me Queen Lynn, but before, I was Lynn the Miller's Daughter."

I laugh. "Foolish girl," I say, "You know so little of magic!" And I am gone--

\* \* \* \* \*

--gone back to my open-house on the high-hill. I compose a little song to sing, and sing it as I dance to the old tree, and from its bowers pluck the ripe leaf-lined cradle, and place it in the center of my house.

I build a fire in the fire-pit, and dance around it singing;

*I made a bargain for the life of a child,  
With a foolish young girl-queen named Lynn,  
My gain in the bargain is already assured,  
for she can't guess that I'm Rumpelstiltskin!*

And for three days waking, I sing, and dance, and compose rhymes, from sun to sun and night to night.

\* \* \* \* \*

And when the time comes to go and claim my little human girl, I find her with her mother, in the castle court, with courtiers all around, and they stare in awe at me.



"Our game is at an end girl, tell me my name, or else I will be going with what is mine."

"Is that any way to address a Queen?" she says sharply from her seat. She looks strangely older now, mature and grim.

"I may address you as I please, o Lynn, graceful Queen and foolish Miller's daughter, for I have your name, and you have not mine!"

Her courtiers murmur amongst themselves to hear such words.

"Is your name Thomas?" she asks.

I laugh. "Nothing of the sort."

"Robert? Richard? William?"

"No, No, and No!" Say I.

"Is your name Gaspar?" she asks, "Or Melchior? Or Belshazzar?"

I laugh so hard I roll about on my back. "It flatters me that you think me wise, but you know I am a Faerie and not a Magi."

"Is your name Rum-rump?" she guesses. "Is it Knob-head? Blunder-bellows? Spindle-shanks?"

"Now you mock me, girl." I say, standing up. "But none of those is my name."

And she is silent long. The other humans watch her. Are they smiling? I wonder why she would choose such a place as this for her humiliation, with so many of her subjects watching. Look how they smile to see her flounder.

And then she smiles also. She leans forward. "Is your name... Rumpelstiltskin?"

"I--! I--! I--!" My vision burns red. Crash! Pain! I find I have stomped my foot so hard, I have embedded it in the floor. "How did you guess! How did you guess!" I shout. "You must have cheated somehow! No-one could have ever guessed my name!"

And now she stands, and laughs, and holding her daughter in her arms-- *her daughter, no longer mine!* -- she laughs at me. "You told me your name yourself." she says.

"I did not!" I shout, and I try to stamp my foot again, but it is already as stamped as it can be.

"Oh yes you did," she explains. "I sent riders throughout the kingdom to ask in every town and collect every Faerie name they could find, but one of them, passing near to a stange hill in the highlands, heard *my name* being sung across the night air, and he followed the voice to the base of the hill, and found an open-house atop it, and saw a small ugly crooked man dancing around a fire, singing, singing a mockery of my name, and singing his own name also. Rumpelstiltskin!"

"Rumpelstiltskin! Rumpelstiltskin! Rumpelstiltskin!" the court choruses with cruel joy, and I pull and pull, to pry my foot from the floor, but it is stuck fast.

"Perhaps I am not so ignorant of magic as you think!" she says, "For it was my own name that brought me yours."

I pull and pull, harder still, and the other humans sing my name. They all have my name! They all have it, and I cannot get away from them. Pull, pull, but I cannot free my foot, so finally I flee without it--

\* \* \* \* \*

--Back home to my open-house on the high-hill, and I shove the forever-empty cradle into the embers of the fire-pit, and crawl down the dark stair to take my long and bitter rest.

The contents of this story are words, and as such, they are to be read, and remembered, and above all, shared. These words belong to you who read them, but these words also belong to he who wrote them. Please respect his ownership of them.

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