



Impossible

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Magic, Retold Fairy Tales

There was no word for what he was in their language, but he still had his name. With no others like him near, he held on to his name. He held on to it as a way to remind him who he was, what he was doing in this corrupt land.

As he sneaked into the castle, he repeated it to himself. It calmed him, though the evil of this place felt as if it would suffocate him. Tonight, he was almost certain, was the night. For the past two nights, the miller's daughter, Ella, had been locked in a room, in the bowels of this castle, and told to spin straw into gold.

Her stupid, drunken father had bragged that she could, and word had eventually reached the king. He'd locked her in the straw filled room these past two nights and threatened her with death if she didn't spin complete her task.

Rumpol had done the job for her on both nights. He took a few trinkets in return, a way of earning her trust. He feared she'd be suspicious if he gave her something for nothing, and he needed her to trust him.

When he entered the straw filled room, he didn't see the girl at first. When he called out to her, she emerged from a pile of straw in the corner. Her eyes were red, her face puffy and swollen. "I don't have anything left." She told him. "I'm sorry. Is there something.... Maybe I can do something for you...." She tugged a bit on her skirt and let him fill in the blanks for himself.

"As a matter of fact, there might be something." He confirmed. The girl looked at him expectantly, and he felt a twist of guilt in his gut. He tried to ignore it. This had to be done. "When you spin this straw into gold, the king will marry you."

The girl began to protest.

"He will." Rumpol assured her.

“But, I...”

“You won’t have a choice,” Rumpol quickly said, before she continued her protests. “Did he give you a choice before he locked you in this room with an impossible task?”

The girl shook her head.

“He’s a selfish, greedy man. He takes what he wants. It doesn’t matter what you want. A year from today, you’ll give birth to your first child, a boy. I want that child.”

She wrinkled her brow, trying to absorb all the information that she’d just been given. He wished he had better news for her.

“Why do you want my child?” She asked.

“I’m not able to tell you everything,” Rumpol spoke patiently. That was true, he didn’t understand it all himself. But he’d been sent here to do a job. To save this foul place. “But I can tell you that he’ll be safe with me. I will raise him well, and he will do wonderful things someday.” He left out what would happen if she kept the boy. Gnawing at her lower lip, she considered the offer. Her alternative was death the next morning. If that happened the child in question would never be born, and all would go on as it always had. But Rumpol hoped for the best. Perhaps not the best for Ella, but the best for the boy, and the kingdom, and the land.

“Yes,” she said, finally, letting the word out into the air of her exhale. Rumpol felt himself relax.

“The deal is struck then.” He said, and got to work.

Over the next year he prepared for the child. He built a cabin in the woods, far from the influence of other people, though he made sure he was close enough to get medical care, should the child need it. He built a cradle, and purchased some soft toys, suitable for a newborn. As the child grew, he would replace these things, but at the start, he knew that the baby wouldn’t be able to do much.

At night the knots of worry tied themselves around his stomach. Could he do this? Could he raise a human child to grow up to be a great man? A small secret part of him feared that the task was impossible.

The time to take the child was approaching. Rumpol was preparing himself to go back into the city. Back among those people in the castle. He felt the anxiety build inside him, as if the taint of their corruption would infect him somehow. It would definitely affect the child, if he stayed. To calm himself, to remind himself who he was, Rumpol repeated his name again.

He was Rumpol. There was no word for what he was in the language of this land. He was going to claim the baby of an evil king, and raise the child well, so that when the boy grew up he could save the kingdom. He had been selected, chosen for this task. As he repeated these facts, like a song in his head, he felt himself relax.

Once again he sneaked into the castle, crawling through the passages and drains. Finally he found the girl, no

longer surrounded by straw and sobbing, but dressed in finery. She sat near a bassinet. When she saw him she stood, her body in front of the bassinet, as if shielding the small occupant from this strange little man.

“You came,” she said, by way of greeting.

He nodded, as if confirming the obvious. He’d had no illusions that this would be easy for her.

“I can pay you now.” She spoke quickly. “Whatever you want, just name it.”

“I want your son,” he explained, as if in apology. He saw that she was attached to the boy. He wished it were different. But he had a job to do. If the child grew up in the care of the king, he would become a tyrant. The whole land would suffer. If he was raised properly, he would be a savior. A redeemer. Should he try to explain that to her? It was worth a try.

When he was through the Queen shook her head. “That won’t happen. I won’t let it. I’ll make sure he’s raised right!”

The little man shook his head. “I’m sorry. If the boy stays, there will be untold suffering.”

The Queen, despite her finery, looked as vulnerable as she had when she was just the Miller’s daughter, given an impossible task and a death sentence. She stood before the bassinet, as if her body would protect the boy from being corrupted. She sneaked a glance at the baby, and wrung her hands. “I’m sorry. I... can’t. I would if I could, but its not possible. I’ll give you anything else.”

Once again Rumpol shook head, and began to approach the bassinet. The reality of what was happening seemed to hit the Queen, and she threw her body over the sleeping baby.

“If you touch him, I’ll scream. I’ll have every guard in the castle here in seconds!”

Rumpol halted his approach, thinking. He couldn’t fight off the entire palace guard. His instinct was to make another bargain. It was the strategy that his kind used most, particularly with humans.

“How about we make another deal?” He suggested.

She said nothing but stood up slowly, until she was facing him. He thought quickly. “I will come back here, every day for the next three days. If you guess my name in that time, then you may keep your son and raise him as best you can. If not, he is mine, and there is no more bargaining. No argument.”

Rumpol drew all of his power around himself to seal the bargain. To ensure it was kept.

“Couldn’t I have every guard, every soldier in this room, by the time you return?” The Queen asked. “Aren’t you nervous?”

“No,” the little man explained. “You know that I have power. You’ve seen me spin straw into gold. You probably felt something in the air change just now. That’s because I’ve already sealed our bargain with my power. There will be consequences if you break it.” He left her to imagine what those consequences would be. It would be

more frightening that way.

The Queen considered this. Then she nodded. "Fine." She said. "Three tries."

He wished he'd thought to threaten her with the consequences of breaking their original deal before he'd made this new one. Then he'd have the child with him now. He tried to calm himself. The Queen would never guess his name.

He visited her the next night and listened to her recite every name imaginable. He did the same the next night. When Rumpol left the castle on the second night, he felt as if he couldn't breathe. He wanted nothing more than to get back to his house. The deprivation, the moral rot of the castle weighed on him. He imagined that it was infecting him, even when he was outside its walls. He feared that spending just a few days here would infect the baby somehow. He hurried home, whispering his name to himself. Reminding himself that he wasn't a part of this land. He was an onlooker. He remained uncontaminated.

He had to force himself to go there that last night. He imagined the rot sinking into him, becoming part of him, as he sneaked in and found the Queen again. She looked different tonight. Less vulnerable. The two previous nights she'd been unsure. She'd begun guessing names as soon as he walked in.

Now she simply smiled at him and said "Shall we begin, Rumpol?"

He felt his breath catch in his throat. "How did you know?"

She smiled as if satisfied with herself. "You were followed when you left here last night. One of my guards heard you muttering it to yourself over and over. You even said 'Rumpol is my name'. You made it very easy for us."

Rumpol went from not being able to breathe to breathing too much as she spoke. He couldn't stop drawing in air, as he saw the kingdom's future before his eyes. The wreckage that the prince would make of this land when he became king. The famine the citizens would suffer through, while their king grew fat. The wars they would be sent to fight to satisfy their king's greed and lust for power. The blood that would flow through the streets as people turned on their king and then on each other. Each vision made him draw another gasp of air.

When he looked at the Queen, he saw that she was smiling triumphantly at his obvious distress. By not sacrificing her child for her kingdom, she'd joined her husband, her father, her kingdom. She could no longer be called "good" or "innocent". She'd acquired the same taint that those around her had.

This is why there was no hope, Rumpol realized. The boy would have no one to teach him good from bad, right from wrong. No one would be able to show him how to do right, even when there was a personal cost. Everyone that would surround him was nefarious. It was Rumpol who had pushed her to this. Was it his fault?

As he drew another gulp of air into his lungs, he felt something burst. And then he ceased to exist.