



The most magnificent beard

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Retold Fairy Tales

Zel stirred the stew over his stove. The candles were lit around the room to combat the fast approaching sunset. Zel knew Mama Gothel would be home soon, not that she slept in the tower, of course not, not after the door had been damaged and Mama Gothel had decided the stairs weren't safe, after all spiral stone staircases were dangerous, everyone knew that.

“Rapunzel Rapunzel let down your hair”

The call was exactly what Zel had been expecting. He grabbed his hair and wrapped it through the carefully built pulley system. Just because Zel had magical healing hair didn't mean that pulling someone up a tower by his hair would hurt any less. Mama Gothel had helped build the system when Zel mentioned the pain her visits caused him. She'd bought him the engineering books he would need to build the system. He hadn't been able to cut the cogs himself, after all it would be dangerous to have a saw lying around. Zel was clumsy, Mama Gothel was always telling him so, it definitely wasn't a wise plan to leave sharp and dangerous objects lying around, or anything that could cause him harm really.

“Precious baby” Mama Gothel greeted, arms open to Zel who stepped in close to receive a kiss to the air near each of his cheeks. Mama Gothel held Zel at arm's length, gently pulling his hair out from behind his ears.

“How are we?” she asked

“Well Mama, I made vegetable stew if you'd like some”

Mama Gothel grimaced “Perhaps a little, my precious lettuce, but you know I don't particularly enjoy stew”

Mama Gothel stayed a while, telling Zel about her travels and all the dangers of the outside world. A few hours passed before Mama Gothel decreed that she needed to leave to return to her rooms, complaining that she

would love to have a secluded tower like Zel's to live in but no matter, she was willing to give it up for the protection of her precious baby.

Zel quite liked the tower. He enjoyed his own company and the way Mama Gothel talked about the outside, between those horrors and Zel's own clumsiness it was best he stayed somewhere safe. He wouldn't have managed a life out there. Mama Gothel never told Zel how he came to be in the tower and he was less than inclined to ask. He hadn't really given it much thought, after all, he was here because it was safe.

Zel liked living alone for many reasons. He could rise at whatever time suited him, eat what suited him – within reason, he was held by what was in his pantry. Zel liked to cook, he liked keeping his space clean, although the challenge of gathering water was ever prevalent. And, of course, Zel loved to sing, especially when he knew nobody would hear him. Mama Gothel had taught him some songs but Zel mostly composed his own. He was halfway through a song when he heard the call

“Rapunzel Rapunzel let down your hair”

Zel hadn't been expecting Mama Gothel to return so soon, it was usually a week or two between visits. He felt hugely unprepared and threw his, as yet unbrushed hair into the pulley system. He must have done it wrong because he felt more pressure than normal pulling at his scalp.

The woman that stepped through the window was not who Zel had been expecting. She was tall and sturdily built but her face was elegantly beautiful. Zel backed away too fast and found himself tugging on his hair in the pulley system. The woman with deep brown eyes reached up to touch his hair, to free him presumably but Zel panicked and darted forward to free himself.

“Who are you?” he demanded, pulling his messy yesterday-braids close to his chest

“Gisela, and you, gentleman with the most magnificent beard I have ever beheld, who might you be?”

“What do you want from me? My hair? My...?”

“Your name?” Gisela smiled

“Rapunzel”

“I happened upon your singing yesterday. I wasn't truly sure of your location until the woman came and asked for your hair. Of course, it was late and I had to return home or I would have visited immediately”

“What?” Zel asked, blinking at the stranger

“What with the ever impending thread of war with the neighbouring kingdom it is important to be home

around sundown”

“War?” Zel asked, it was a work he hadn’t come across in his meagre book supply and not one that Mama Gothel had ever brought up before.

Gisela tilted her head to one side “You don’t get out much do you?”

“Mama Gothel says it’s dangerous outside. I’m safe up here”

“You must be lonely”

“Mama Gothel visits often” Zel hoped it sounded like a warning or a threat, hoped Gisela wouldn’t try anything awful because he wasn’t actually sure when Mama Gothel would next visit.

Gisela didn’t stay long, climbing back down Zel’s hair after she had insisted on brushing and rebraiding it for him “After all, it’s my fault the braids got damaged” she had said and Zel hadn’t had the heart of the confidence to disagree. Not to mention he quite liked having his hair cared for by someone else and Mama Gothel had stopped spending the time on it after Zel had grown enough to take care of it himself.

Zel couldn’t help but admire himself in the mirror after Gisela had gone. It really was so much nicer when somebody else braided it, normally when Zel was left to his own devices there were kinks and bends and an odd point at the back of his head he could never get quite right. Not to mention he was forever braiding his beard into his hair by accident, incidentally a nightmare whenever he discovered that mistake.

Zel didn’t expect Gisela to come back but sure enough the next day a voice called to him. Gisela was a very pleasant guest, spotting the mop bucket she offered to help if Zel was cleaning up. She wasn’t very good at it but the way she babbled at Zel about her adventures was nice. Her life was a like a daydream, filled with all sorts of things Zel thought were too fantastical to be real. Gisela assured him they were and told him about how they handled the small amounts of crime within her hometown. “So, really, it’s not as dangerous as you might think”. She didn’t stay too long.

Yet again the next day she appeared. This time carrying a basket filled with picnic foods. Zel was grateful, Mama Gothel hadn't provided any new food lately and his stores were becoming far too depleted. Seeing the happiness on Zel's face and watching him excitedly try and enjoy new kinds of food made Gisela resolve to bring this strange isolated man more foods to try and company to enjoy. She mostly came for lunch after that, keeping Zel both full and entertained.

Zel hadn't realised what loneliness felt like until he had the company of someone like Gisela. She was never too intrusive, she never overstayed her welcome, she was never upset with him for not knowing something or for asking silly questions.

When Zel heard Mama Gothel calling him from the base of the tower during a lunch with Gisela his eyes blew to moon sized. "Hide" he hissed at Gisela. Her eyebrows twitched as if to frown but upon looking at Zel she scurried into the pantry.

Zel didn't have time to clean up the picnic supplies as Mama Gothel was calling him again. He pulled her up and chewed his lip, twisting his hands behind his back. He apologised for taking too long, trying for an excuse about having to finish braiding his hair. He tried to stand in the way of Mama Gothel's view of the picnic blanket. Mama Gothel greeted Zel in her usual way, a kiss near each cheek and asking how he had been. Her eyes landed on the blanket on the floor "What's all this?"

"Um... a picnic?"

"And where did you get these kinds of things?" she poked at some of the food with the toe of her boot

"I - uh - I've been saving them for a special occasion"

"What's the occasion?" Mama Gothel asked, arms folded, face stern

Zel wracked his brain for a plausible reason. Any reason that day was more special than any other. "My birthday" he blurted

Mama Gothel hadn't expected an answer, he realised, she'd expected him to be lying, it didn't matter that he was lying Zel felt a little prickle of insult. He knew Mama Gothel wouldn't understand about Gisela, to her Gisela would be the same as any other outsider, a dangerous stranger. Zel was beginning to believe that perhaps Mama Gothel wasn't quite right about the outside world.

Zel thought he'd managed to fool Mama Gothel when she sat with him and picked at the picnic food for a little

while before leaving. Zel let Gisela out of the pantry, apologising profusely as he started putting the food Mama Gothel had brought away.

“Zel” Gisela stopped him “I’m not going to demand you explain anything. Your expression told me you needed me to listen to you and hide so I did. If you want to tell me you can, that’s what friends are for, but you don’t have to”

“Friends?”

“Aren’t we friends?” her face turned sultry “unless you want to be more than friends?”

“I’ve never had a friend before” Zel admitted. Gisela’s face softened

“I’m not going to tell you ‘you have to leave this tower’ and defy your... guardian? – I’m not going to tell you what to do but please believe me when I say the world outside isn’t half as scary as she’s telling you it is. And anyway, I’d keep you safe out there if you wanted me to”

The next day when Zel heard the call of

“Rapunzel Rapunzel let down your hair” he threw his hair into the mechanism and waited for Gisela to pull herself up. When Gisela didn’t appear he poked his head out of the window to spot Mama Gothel at the base of the tower. He hastily yanked her up.

“You took your time” Mama Gothel greeted with a frown, kissing the air by both of Zel’s cheeks as if everything was normal and her gaze wasn’t spearing into Zel like an ice pick.

“I’m sorry” Zel answered simply, chewing his lip again. He didn’t like lying to the person who had taken care of him for his whole life. He knew it was necessary but it didn’t change the way he felt.

Zel was halfway through making tea for Mama Gothel when he heard a sound that made all his efforts to hide his relationship with Gisela fruitless. She called up from the base of the tower

“Rapunzel Rapunzel let down your hair”

Zel froze. Mama Gothel’s eyes narrowed. She moved to the window. Zel stared as Mama Gothel peered out of the window. He knew she saw Gisela. He knew she would know he had lied. She would know everything.

“Rapunzel, would you care to explain?” Mama Gothel’s voice was cold

“Explain?” he squeaked

“The young lady who knows your name, I was prepared to let the picnic lie go but you’re obviously consorting with outsiders, this is unacceptable Rapunzel, I am trying to keep you safe up here and you’re undoing all my

hard work. Are you trying to upset me?"

Zel felt tears prick his eyes "no Mama" he whispered

"Let your friend up" she hissed

"What?"

"I will not ask you again Rapunzel"

Zel didn't move. It was as if he had turned to stone under Mama Gothel's cold gaze. She wrapped her hand around a braid of hair, twisting it around her fist, she dragged him over to the window and let his hair fall, not bothering with the pulley. Gisela pulled herself over the windowsill, meeting Zel's terrified gaze.

"Zel?" she asked as Mama Gothel stepped up to her

"Princess Gisela?" she smirked, her eyes still cold as Gisela turned to look at her, too slow to react as Mama Gothel shoved hard at her shoulders sending her tumbling from the tower "Now look what you did Rapunzel" Mama Gothel snarled, "And since you've proven yourself untrustworthy this lovely tower will have to be changed for somewhere much less pleasant."

She still had hold of Zel's hair. Zel was staring at the window where Gisela had just been as Mama Gothel started pulling him down the treacherous spiral staircase that was supposed to end in a door that had been damaged into not working and yet here there were, Mama Gothel dragging Zel through a perfectly functional door. Zel's whole life was crashing around him and the one person who might have helped him through it was probably dead on the other side of his former home.

That was when Zel noticed the dagger at Mama Gothel's belt. He dove for it and managed to pull it into his hands. Mama Gothel stopped and looked at him, holding her free hand out for him to give the dagger back.

"hand it over, Rapunzel, we both know you're not going to stab me"

"No" Zel's voice shook almost as much as his hands as he stared at the person he thought was caring and benevolent and protecting him. Her eyes were colder than he had ever seen them. Zel wasn't going to stab her, of course not, he grabbed his hair, pulled it taught and sliced. It was more difficult than he had expected, resisting the blade, making him saw through it.

"No!" Mama Gothel shrieked, trying to wrestle the dagger from Zel. Zel tried desperately to cling to the dagger, to keep cutting away his magical hair, he knew his value would decrease, he knew he would be safer without his precious gift. He wasn't as sure that Mama Gothel wouldn't want him anymore but he thought it worth the risk. He clenched his hands tightly around the dagger, unwilling to let it slip from his grasp. With surprising

strength he shoved Mama Gothel away from him and sawed at his hair further, faster, furiously trying to get rid of it all.

Mama Gothel grasped at the abandoned strands, still braided together, limp and dull. She looked up at Zel and shrieked, diving at him. He didn't realise he was still holding the dagger until Mama Gothel stumbled back, clutching her stomach.

"Zel?" Gisela's voice tugged his focus and he turned to see her limping toward him, injured but alive. His hands were shaking as he dropped the bloody dagger, turning back to face Mama Gothel but she was gone. It felt like all the strength flooded out of him as he stumbled toward Gisela. She reached up to touch his now chin length uneven hair "I like it" she smiled

"What about my glorious beard?" he found himself asking

"Tidy it up a little and it will still be the most glorious beard I have ever beheld" she grinned

"Can I come home with you?"

"What else a friends for?"

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