

## **Rumpelstilzchen and the Mercy of Elves**

by Cyrine Sinti

*In the days of curses, and charms, I lived with my kind in the Black Forest.*

*We would frolic with whomever entered the forest, we would feast with families enjoying plump fruits on soft picnic blankets, we would sing little ones to sleep for mothers and cut wood for fathers. We believed we had been sent from the WolkeWelt (CloudWorld) by the Wolke-Hexe (Cloud-Witch) to help you sweet ones on this land.*

*For many years, we helped and guided. For those years we were thanked and never minded.*

*Then a lesson was taught to us all.*

*A lesson of the follies of humankind that would sever the ties between the WolkeWelt and this one forevermore.*

\*

Katinka Müller was the daughter of the local miller. She had a good life, her mother had sadly died in childbirth, but her father took great care of her and worked harder the older she got so she could spend her days lazily enjoying the great German lands.

Because she had no chores, her life was one of preserving beauty. She would preen her hair with ribbons and perfume her skin with lavender as her father worked in the mill until his hands were raw.

One windy Wednesday morning Katinka, preparing herself some bread and the last bit of jam her father kept for breakfast, decided to visit the baker's daughter, Frida. Now, you may think Frida and Katinka were friends.

They were not.

Katinka laughed at Frida's jam-streaked cheeks, her flour-dusted hair, and the little roll in her belly. Frida loved her rosy-looking cheeks, powdery hair, and the pretzel-fold in her belly. So Katinka worked extra hard to make her cry.

She planned to sit opposite the bakery and enjoy her lunch whilst braiding lilac ribbons into her fine hair.

Frida would be working, especially since her mother had passed away after a painful dose of winter cold.

When Katinka arrived in the cosy marketplace, Frida was carrying a large basket of baked loaves out to display on a tattered rack. Katinka smirked as she imagined knocking over the bread.

“Frida, *liebe*, sweep the floor. The dust will settle on the cakes otherwise.” Frida’s father handed her a broom with a kiss on her forehead. She happily swept up whilst humming a tune.

“Frida, Frida!” Katinka trilled. “Won’t you join me for some bread and woodruff jam?”

Frida looked up, “I have my fill of bread here!” and carried on sweeping.

Katinka soured.

“Frida, Frida!” She sang. “Won’t you come and help me plait these ribbons into my hair?”

Frida turned with a sweet smile, “A free girl like you should have free hair too!” and carried on sweeping.

The wind blew crumbs from Frida’s broom to the bench Katinka had draped herself on, almost touching the hem of her white dress. She yelped and rushed home. Leaving the basket of bread and jam.

Katinka sulked until her father came home, tired, and hungry.

“Tinka! I have bread and cheese for our supper, for you I have some stew! Fetch a bowl.”

He set the tiny portion of cheese on the table and hacked a tiny piece of for himself.

“I shan’t!” Katinka scowled. “I’ve had a wretched day.”

“Oh dear! I’ll fetch the bowl; you tell me who has upset my Tinka!” His knees creaked as he hauled himself up.

He poured every last drop of the stew into the bowl, setting it next to the large piece of bread and generous lump of cheese. He pushed the table carefully toward Katinka, ignoring his own growling stomach.

“Who has upset you?” He asked.

“Oh, never mind. What good can you do?” Katinka dipped her bread into the stew. “This stew is ghastly.”

She carried on eating until the bowl was bone dry.

“I have some good news!” Her father patted her knee. “Johann, my assistant. He has asked for your hand. He-”

“NO!” She shrieked at once. “I SHAN’T BE A MILLER’S WIFE. I SHAN’T WASTE MY BEAUTY ON A SHACK LIKE THIS!”

“Dear, my bones have only three more winters left. What shall become of my darling Tinka?”

“I may be a lowly miller’s daughter, but I can spin straw to gold. I will surely live the life my beauty was intended for.” With that, Katinka dashed off to her bed.

The next day the local men had their weekly townsmen meeting at the tavern. They each had a tankard of ale and shared a roasted hen. Soon after the business of the town had been cleared, talk turned to their children.

“My Frida makes better *Birnenkuchen* (pear cake) than I!” said the Baker.

“My Heinrich makes better *Würste* (sausages) than I!” said the Butcher.

“We are so very lucky to have such good children!” the men agreed.

“Your children may be good but my Katinka is Godly” said the Miller. “For she can spin straw into gold. That is far better than *Birnenkuchen*, *Würste* and carvings.”

The Miller gulped the last drop of ale in his tankard and left the men in dumbfounded silence.

Like wildfire the rumours of spoiled Katinka Müller spinning straw into gold spread throughout the land. Spreading and spreading until it finally hit the ears of the Prince.

“Straw into gold?! Why, I’ll be richer than my father!” The greedy Prince wanted to overtake his father, the King, so he could be in charge of the entire German empire. He grew tired of living reasonably and wanted the power he believed he was owed as the son of royalty. “Bring this woman to me!”

The Prince’s men travelled to the tavern and asked who it was that had bragged of their daughter’s Midas ways.

Eventually they discovered it was Katinka Müller, the Miller’s daughter.

Horses and armoured men marched to the Millers house with a small pouch of coins and a request.

The Miller rushed home when the townsfolk found him at the mill to tell him of the strange news.

The Miller was a master of grains, mills, and labour but he was a man of simple thoughts and when Katinka had told him she could spin straw to gold, he didn’t realise she was talking in metaphor.

“Katinka!” He burst through the door gleefully. “Quickly! The Prince’s men are on their way here!

“What?” Katinka dashed about preening, plucking, painting her soft face. “Oh father! This is my chance to leave this hovel!”

Her father’s heart stung at the way she described their home. To him, it was full of memories of her mother. But if his dear Tinka wanted to leave, then she must!

Soon enough the Prince's men stood before Miller's house. He let them in with his cap between his hands as Katinka sat regally on her chair.

"She is the Katinka Müller, the one who is fabled to spin Gold from straw?" Said the Prince's right-hand man, Hans.

"Excuse me?" Katinka asked, unsure whether she heard them clearly or not. "Spin Gold from straw?"

She realised what her father had done.

"Yes." Said Hans. "The Prince wishes to meet such a sorceress."

She took her chance. As soon as the Prince saw her striking beauty, she was sure that he wouldn't mind that she couldn't spin straw into straw never mind gold.

"Yes, it is I!" Katinka stood, chest thrust, and lips pouted.

The Miller proudly waved her off as she insisted on going alone with the Prince's men.

The journey bored Katinka to sleep, the lush countryside of Germany was wasted on her.

Hans gently shook her awake when they arrived at the Royal Castle.

Before the Prince, Katinka waited for him to look at her. Simply one look would plunge him into the throes of passion, he would never want her delicate hands to touch a loom. She arched her back and pulled her shoulders back to make sure her wares were on proper display. Biting her lips slightly to bring a redness to them, she parted her lips and drooped her eyelids.

"This is her?" The Prince took a look at her and barked to Hans. "A simpleton you have brought before me. You bid me to believe this lulling idiot can spin Gold from straw?"

Katinka's eyes snapped wide and her face fell. "I am no simpleton, I am Katinka Müller."

"Müller? A Miller's daughter?" The Prince cried. "A Miller's daughter will be the one to help me overtake my father? The Jester has been outdone. This has been the greatest fool."

“You rude creature! The only ‘fool’ is that ridiculous way you speak. I am more than the Miller’s daughter. I am the one who spins straw into Gold. Look at these hands! They only know the softness of straw and the indulgence of gold.” Katinka held up her fair, petite hands, untainted by the roughness of the outdoors.

“I will give you the opportunity to prove your word. But, Müller, if by sunrise you have failed, this ‘rude creature’ shall hang you from the gallows by those same hands.”

The blood drained from her as she dizzily slid across the floor, Hans leading her away regardless.

She was left in a room full of straw and a loom.

“What am I to do? How can I spin straw into gold? Oh, damn my father! Foolish, stupid, silly man!” She threw herself on the floor and wept.

She wept bitterly and harshly.

\*

*She wept so loudly, my friends, that we elves stood still. We had been in the forest all day, making little puppets out of the fallen leaves for the children to find. We knew nothing of Katinka Müller until that moment we heard her shrill crying. Our hearts melted!*

\*

Katinka continued to sob all over the straw. All she wanted was her father to come and save her.

She heard a small knock from the wall behind her and sat up quickly.

“Y... yes?” she whispered.

*“Deine Tränen rufen die Elfen*

*Liebes Kind, ich werde dir helfen”*

“What?” Katinka snivelled. She strained her ears to hear, she was sure she was going mad with despair.

*“Your tears have called the elves*

*Dear child, I am here to help”*

Slowly, gently, and ever so softly, crept out an elf. He had a crook in his nose and puffy cheeks of delightful red, a beard of white and a green hat upon his head.

Katinka was startled. “The sheer ugliness of this creature!’ she thought.

“My name is Rumpelstilzchen and I am here to help you.” He said with a voice of honey.

“How?” Katinka scoffed.

“I can spin this straw into gold.”

“But how?!” Katinka suddenly unclasped her sparkling necklace. “Take this! Take this! I beg you, save my life!”

Rumpelstilzchen took the necklace and bowed low. He had never held such an exquisite thing before. He kept it in his pocket, ready to give to one of the orphan children near the Black Forest, as he set to work.

“What is your name, precious one?” he asked as he span straw into the finest, silkiest gold humankind had ever seen.

With that, Katinka spent the whole night telling Rumpelstilzchen of her ribbons, of her rouge, of her picnics. Not once did she speak of her father.

By sunrise Rumpelstilzchen had finished. Back aching, hands sore, yet he was honoured to save a life.

“Quick, go! Go before they see you!” Katinka hurried.

“Ah...yes.... well good luck!” Rumpelstilzchen left.

Hans barged in to find, to his surprise, a room full of gold and Katinka poised elegantly on the stool.

The Prince was astounded! Drunk at the mere sight of the gold, his plan to buy his father's men and overthrow him was finally realised. He immediately left without a backwards glance at the posturing Katinka.

She started to argue that she wanted to go back home but the door was bolted before she could speak.

After hours, Hans returned with the Prince, now crowned King. Katinka had used the glistening gold to re-braid her ribbons in her hair.

"You will do this again." The King ordered. "Today was a success that I had not foreseen. I had considered this day to be years from me."

"How can I do it again when I am so tired?" Katinka said.

The King took her by the hand and led her to another room. Larger than the last with straw stuffed into every nook and cranny.

"Spin! Spin or hang from those pretty ribbons!" His laugh echoing down the hallway as his boots stomped away.

Katinka tried to bang on the closed door but her hands stung from the rough wood. "Oh, now what to do! He is a beast to enjoy the torture of a maid as beautiful as me! Is this his revenge for only having ghastly women in his castle?"

Again, she wept, louder and shriller.

Again, little Rumpelstilzchen came to her rescue with his name and a curtsy.

Again, she spoke all night of her charmed life of hair brushing and fanciful perfumes.

"Go!" Katinka had her back to Rumpelstilzchen as she gazed at her reflection in Gold.

He left.



The King, intoxicated by the room of treasure, took Katinka in his arms and danced with her to the largest room in the castle. “Once more, Müller. Once more and you shall become my treasured wife. From Müller to Queen, a greater stride never before seen.”

Now, Katinka wasn’t afraid. Lazily wailing as she inspected her nails, she barely acknowledged the elf crawling out from under the straw.

“It is I, Rumpelstilzchen!” He beamed but waddled over to the loom when Katinka continued admiring her hands.

Halfway through the night, Katinka was once more telling him of her life of tarts and fruits.

“Your village is exceedingly kind! An orphan living better than-”

“An orphan?” Katinka rudely snorted. “I am not an orphan. I have a father; he buys me all these pretty things. Not the villagers.”

Startled by this, Rumpelstilzchen stopped spinning. “Katinka, for three nights now I have sat with you and heard of your life. A life of bread, fruit, and perfume. Yet not once did you mention your dear father! Shame on you!”

“Shame on me? You gruesome rat. Shame on you for daring to show me your unsightly face. Spin the gold and to hell with you.” She sauntered to the window. “This will be mine in the morning. You and my father couldn’t possibly match a life like this.”

“Of you I grow tired,  
Most selfish child ever sired,  
For you I have worked to the bone,  
Yet not one gratitude will you loan.  
I will spin no more.”

Rumpelstilzchen stood.

“You shall spin! Spin that gold or I will-”

“Tell the King that you have cheated him twice?”

Katinka swayed, surely such a treachery meant death. She’d be humiliated.

“Let us not be so hasty! I will tell you of my father!” She pleaded.

“No thank you, I bid you goodbye.”

“Please! Please, they will hang me! I don’t want to die, please!” Katinka sobbed.

Rumpelstilzchen, elf from the *WolkeWelt*, had a heart of clouds and could not do with a crying human.

“I’ll give you anything! Please!” Katinka sniffed.

“Should you have a child with the King, allow me to name the little cherub with a *WolkeWelt* name.” Rumpelstilzchen asked.

Agreeing blindly, Katinka sank in relief as Rumpelstilzchen spun the straw into gold for the last time.

“Leave, they’re coming!” Katinka shooed.

“I will see you again soon!” Rumpelstilzchen bid her goodbye.

A year had passed and wrapped in silk, draped in jewels, Katinka Müller had grown ever more spoiled. Her child had been born two nights ago and she was reluctant to hold him, for fear of ruining her pretty dress.

“Every time I hold him, he cries!” she had complained to her various maids.

“Maybe your rings are scratching him?” Offered one maid, promptly dismissed.

The same evening came a knock on her chamber door.

It was Rumpelstilzchen.

“YOU! What do you want?!” She gasped.

“I have brought the name for your son! As promised!” He smiled kindly, holding a small basket of berries for Katinka.

“Absolutely not!” She kicked at him, sending the basket to the floor.

“You gave your word!” cried Rumpelstilzchen.

“Preposterous! Nobody shall ever believe you”

“They may, should I ask them to watch me spin straw into gold.”

Katinka froze. “You cannot! My father has died of winter cold, I have nowhere else to go! I have changed, I promise. I help my maids and I adore my little baby. I want to name him after my own dear father.”

Her tears picked at Rumpelstilzchen despite her sour words.

“If you can tell me my name, then I will leave forever. If not, the truth must be shared.” He took off his cap, willing her to remember the three times he told her his name.

“Your name? You never told me your name!” She said.

“Try to remember.” He whispered sadly.

“Markus? Kristoff? How should I know what your ilk calls each other?” Katinka was losing her patience. Hearing her husband’s horses returning to the castle, she thought quick. “Come inside, permit me one more chance!”

Rumpelstilzchen followed her, not fearing her when she closed the door, nor when she held a hand-mirror to her pouting face. He saw her intention too late.

She smashed the mirror over his small face. Turning him to fairydust, blown back to the *WolkeWelt*.

\*

*My friends, you see I was never the dastardly monster. I foolishly wanted to help a person who had no good in their heart. For centuries I have been called a fiend and brute. I never took her ring; I gave away her necklace. I just wanted kindness. If she had only learnt my name! Not the cruel ‘Rumpelstiltskin’ she falsely remembered when boasting of her victory to her maids, but my true, sweet name. Rumpelstilzchen.*