

GOLDEN FUR

By Midori Snyder

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IT HAPPENED once that a king went to war, and when he did, he lost first his fortune, then his crown, and last his life. But before he died, he sent his Queen and infant son into hiding so that they might be spared. The Queen and prince lived alone on the edge of a great desert where the rocks were stained purple and gold by the afternoon sun.

“So like the palace,” the Queen sighed at a desert sunset. “But how I have faded,” she said sadly looking at her garments that once were dyed a royal purple and now were threadbare and bleached by the sun.

But the Prince did not miss the palace life for he found riches in the desert. As a boy, he hunted for the small red snakes that sheltered in the cool shade of the rocks. He brought home to his mother the pink scrub roses that bloomed with a sweet dusty scent just after a rain. And in the night, he marveled at the stars scattered like diamonds across the sky.

One evening the Queen spoke to him. “My son, you are almost a man and I am too old to remain here. In the morning I shall return to my people. But you may not come for that would be dangerous. Your father’s enemy sits on the throne and his men still search for you. You must cross the desert and find your future elsewhere.”

She gave him a seed cake and dried fruit wrapped in a cloth and bid him take their old horse. Then he bowed his head and she kissed him farewell.

That night the Prince rode into the desert, following the stars as they wheeled merrily in the sky. One star in particular attracted him for it glowed more brightly than all the rest. He followed it until he grew weary and then rolling in a blanket, slept beneath its watchful eye. He rose early in the morning and saw the star just before it faded with the rising sun. Then setting his horse in that direction, he continued his journey.

It was on the third day of wandering that the Prince arrived at the gates of a huge castle. It rose out of the desert like a giant's back tooth. But no matter how loudly the Prince called, there was no answer from within. At the back of the castle, the Prince found a patch of green grass growing near a flowing spring.

The Prince and his horse were very thirsty after their journey. Man and horse alike dipped their heads into the cool water and drank. Then the Prince let his horse feed on the grass while he unpacked the last of his food. He sighed looking at the two apricots and the half a seed cake. They weren't much to fill the emptiness of his stomach. In the early twilight, he looked up and saw his star glimmering between the castle towers. "Well," he said, "it looks as though I am here."

He was startled by a scurrying sound and from a little hole between two rocks, he saw a small golden creature emerge. She stuck out a pink snout, her whiskers quivering as she caught the scent of the Prince's food. She squeezed herself through the rocks and then sitting on a flat stone beside the Prince, she washed her face between her two paws. Though the Prince was tired, he delighted in the sight of the little creature. She was graceful as she washed first her face, then scrubbed behind each shell ear, and last, arched her neck to lick down her back. As she smoothed her ruffled fur it shone in the setting sun like a spoonful of poured honey. She finished cleaning herself, crossed her paws before her, and then waited. Two black bead eyes looked up at the Prince.

The Prince laughed and though it was little enough for himself, he gave her the last seed cake. She took it between her paws, nibbling at the edges. And then all at once, she broke the cake in two and stuffed it into her cheeks. The Prince laughed again as her small, narrow head became round and fat.

"You may call me Sophia and I thank you, my Prince," she squeaked. "You have a generous nature."

"Though it benefits you small one," he replied sadly, "I fear it has done me little good. I have reached the end of my journey but I am worse off than I began."

The creature rocked back on her hind legs and wiped away the crumbs in her whiskers. "Not so," she disagreed. "In exchange for the meal you have shared with me, I shall help you, my Prince. In this stone castle, there is a Princess. She is kind and beautiful, with raven hair and skin scented like almonds. She is also wealthy, my Prince, and wears a gold ring on every finger."

“But why then does she live here?” asked the Prince.

“She is a prisoner of the Guardians. But if you succeed in winning her back from them. A bride and a kingdom would be yours to gain. Are you willing to try?”

“And if I should lose?” he asked.

Sofia tsked between two long front teeth. “You would die my Prince.”

The Prince leaned his back against the castle wall and considered his choices. Above him, the star twinkled brightly. “I shall try,” he agreed.

“Sleep now then, my Prince, and in the morning I shall tell you what to do.”

The prince laid down on his blanket and weary with hunger and travel, closed his eyes. It wasn't long before he dreamed of a woman with raven hair and almond-scented skin. In her black eyes, the stars gleamed.

The Prince woke as the first rays of the sun slanted over the castle walls. Beside him was a tray with bread and fruit and a white buttery cheese. Sofia sat washing her face, her paws crisscrossing over her pink snout. She waited until the Prince had eaten his fill. Then she spoke. “Come closer my Prince, and I shall tell you of the first task.”

The Prince bent his ear to listen.

“The gates will open to you today,” Sofia said. “Once inside you will be surrounded by the Guardians. Be brave my Prince for they are fierce to look at but cannot harm you as long as you do not draw your sword. They will ask you to dine with them. This is what you must do.” And as Sophia whispered her instructions, her whiskers tickled his ear.

When she had finished speaking she yawned widely. “And now my Prince I shall sleep, for I am a night creature.” She crawled into the pocket of his cloak and curling into a ball of golden fur, fell fast asleep.

The Prince went to the gates and just as Sofia had said, they were opened to receive him. No sooner had he stepped foot in the courtyard than he was surrounded by the Guardians. There were four of them and though they looked like beasts, they were richly dressed and reared back on two legs to tower over him. They had flat faces, their eyes golden disks and their tufted ears pricked forward from a ruff of silvery fur. They howled and hissed at him and though he was frightened by their sharp teeth, he did not draw his sword. They circled him, sniffing the air, and then satisfied, sat back on their haunches, and licked their claws.

“Join us Prince at the table,” the largest Guardian rumbled in a deep voice.

“You honor me,” replied the Prince humbly, and heard the second Guardian murmur appreciatively.

“Well, at least this one has manners,” the third whispered.

“Mannered or not, they all taste the same,” snarled the fourth, and the Prince felt a cold drop of sweat prickle his back.

They entered the Great Hall where a fire roared in the hearth and a table was set with golden plates filled with food and crystal goblets brimming with wine. On the walls hung tapestries bearing scenes of royal hunts in great wooded forests.

The Prince sat down and the Guardians took their seats at the table.

“Well, my Prince,” rumbled the largest Guardian, “you shall cut the capon,” he ordered. The Guardian passed the Prince a tray on which sat a brown roasted bird. The Prince smelled it and was instantly hungry. He carved the head first, placed it on a golden plate, and gave it to the Guardian with the rumbling voice. “To the father goes the head, for he must guide his family well.”

Then the Prince carved the back of the bird, set it down on another golden plate, and gave it to the Guardian with two earrings in the tip of one ear. “To the mother goes the back, for shoulders the cares of her family, and sees to their needs.”

He carved the legs and set them on a small golden plate, which he gave to the Guardian with the silver-capped teeth. “To the son goes the legs, for he must follow his parents’ commands.”

The prince took the two remaining wings and set them on the last plate which he gave to the Guardian with only one earring on the tip of her ear. “To the daughter goes wings, that she may fly away from her family to marry when she is ready.”

“And you my Prince?” asked the largest Guardian. “Will you not eat?”

The Prince was hungry, the sight of so much food enticing. But he remembered Sofia’s warning and politely refused. At that the Guardians sprang up from their seats, hissing angrily and bearing their sharp teeth. But in a moment they were gone, disappearing into a cloud of smoke.

And with them went all the grandeur of the room. All its rich furnishings were returned to stone. Even the wonderful food faded on the plates into desert plants with

thick leaves and stout thorns. Brown lizards scurried over the broken floors and slipped into cracks.

The Prince left the Great Hall, surprised to discover that outside the castle it was already night. As he sat down by the spring, Sofia stirred in his pocket. She slipped out and standing on a stone began to wash her face.

Then she stopped and the black eyes twinkled at him. “So, you have succeeded in the first task,” she said. “But now you must sleep. In the morning I shall tell you of the second task.”

The Prince needed little coaxing, for he was very tired and soon lay fast asleep beside the spring. He dreamed again of the woman with black hair and almond-scented skin. She spoke to him this time and her voice was musical. She sat beside him and her hair brushed against his face. The Prince stirred and then realized it was Sofia’s whiskers tickling his ear.

“Wake up my Prince,” she said urgently, “you must prepare for the second task.”

“I dreamed of the Princess,” the young man said, absently taking a piece of bread and cheese.

“And how did you find her?” asked Sofia, her whiskers arched forward.

“She’s beautiful.”

“And do you love her?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Then this is what you must do.”

The Prince leaned down to hear her whispered message and caught the faint scent of almonds on Sofia’s fur.

The Prince went to the gates of the stone castle and as before, they were opened to him. The Guardians appeared and this time they were friendly, clapping their heavy paws on his shoulders in greeting.

“Come,” rumbled the largest Guardian. “Today you will choose a token from our treasure chamber.”

The Guardians led the Prince to a room and as he entered he was nearly blinded by the light of so many jewels and bags of gold piled around the room.

“Perhaps this never-empty chest of gold, to keep your love in splendor,” suggested the largest Guardian.

“Or a crown to circle her head,” said the Guardian with two earrings in her tufted ear.

“You could protect her against all enemies with this sword,” exclaimed the Guardian with the silver-capped teeth. He slashed the air with a whistling sword of sharpened steel.

“A gold ring for her finger,” sighed the last Guardian with one earring in her pointed ear.

The Prince stared in awe at the magnificent wealth of the treasure chamber and felt sorely tempted by all of it. But he continued searching until among the splendid jewels he found what he was looking for. “I will take this,” he said, holding up a pomegranate, its rind brown as rusted leather.

“Is that all?” demanded the largest Guardian.

“It is all I want,” replied the Prince.

The Guardians howled and their golden eyes flashed dangerously. But as before, they disappeared into a cloud of smoke. The bright jewels became rocks, the sword a twisted stick, and the chests of gold held only withered leaves.

The Prince left the castle and saw again that it was night. He sat by the spring and waited for Sofia to wake. She wriggled free of his pocket and sat on a stone to wash her face. When she was done, she crossed her paws and sniffed the air.

“You have a pomegranate,” she said. “Open it and see what is inside.”

The Prince pried away the leathery rind and inside he saw that the rows of red seeds were carved from chips of rubies.

“Those are the tears shed by the Princess,” Sofia said.

The Prince gathered them up into a cloth.

“Do they not please you, my Prince?” asked Sofia.

“I would rather be poor than gain wealth by her unhappiness,” sighed the Prince.

He laid down and went to sleep and soon he was dreaming of the Princess. Her long black hair flowed over her shoulders and her starlit eyes captivated his heart. In his dream they walked through a flowering garden, talking and sharing their innermost

thoughts. The Prince bent his head to kiss the Princess but instead of her lips, he felt the soft tickling of Sofia's whiskers on his cheek.

"Rise, my Prince, for today is the last trial."

The Prince woke and saw a tray of bread and cheese. He ate sparingly and drank a small sip of the wine.

"I dreamed of the Princess again," said the Prince.

"And how did you find her?"

"More beautiful than before," he replied.

"Do you love her?"

"Yes," answered the Prince with no hesitation. He rose, eager to be done with the final task. "What must I do?" he asked Sophia.

She lowered her head, her whiskers trailing in the dust. "I may not give you counsel for this task. You must follow your own heart.

The Prince gathered Sophia into his palm. He smelled the sweet fragrance of almonds on her fur. "You have done more than enough to help me," said the Prince. He tucked her into his pocket and with a bold courage that comes from love, he strode through the castle gates.

The Guardians were there to meet him, seated on jeweled thrones. Over their shoulders, they wore mantles made from golden fur that shimmered in the morning sun like poured honey. The largest Guardian rose to greet the Prince, his black-tipped ears flat against his skull.

"For your final task, my Prince, we demand you bring to us one more pelt of golden fur to complete my mantle." The Guardian held up his cloak and showed the Prince the bare spot at the hem, about the size of Sofia's back. "Do this and the Princess and her kingdom are yours. Fail, and we will tear you apart without claws."

The Prince's blood ran cold. In his pocket, Sofia trembled. The Guardian close behind him their clawed feet clicking against the stones.

When he came to the last room, the Prince turned to the Guardians with a heavy heart. There were no other creatures with golden fur, but the one hiding in his pocket. But he knew as he faced the Guardians that he would not betray Sofia. He thought of the Princess and her sad smile and though he loved her, he hoped she would understand.

“Well?” hissed the largest Guardian.

“I cannot find the creature you seek,” the Prince said.

“Are you sure?” asked the second Guardian. She lifted her nose and sniffed the air. “I can smell it, close by,” she growled.

“No,” said the Prince and he tightened his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Without warning, Sofia wriggled out of his pocket and jumped to the floor.

“I will not let you die for me,” she said and crouched at the feet of the Guardians.

The largest Guardian swiftly drew one huge paw, claws extended to strike. But even as he pounced on Sofia, the Prince drew his sword and struck the Guardian. His sword passed through the Guardian and to his amazement, the Prince saw the hollow head of the Guardian roll across the floor. The second Guardian attacked and with new courage, the Prince countered with his sword. As before, his sword slashed through the body of the Guardian. The Guardian split and fell like the two halves of a gourd. The Prince turned to the third guard and cleaved it in two with one blow. It too was hollow. The last Guardian hissed at him and crumpled like old paper before his astonished eyes.

There was no one left except himself and Sofia curled in a little ball and bleeding.

He picked her up gently and saw that her wound was deep.

“Do not fear, my Prince,” she whispered. “Take me to the spring.”

Tears fell from the Prince’s eyes and became chips of rubies. The Prince carried Sofia to the spring and laid her down on the grass. He cupped his hands and brought her a drink of water.

She took a sip and her eyes became bright again. “Now I am free,” she said.

As the Prince watched, her fur began to fall away. From within the tiny body, something larger struggled to get out. The Prince stepped back as the Princess rose up from the tiny fragment of golden fur. She shook out her long black hair and gave a musical laugh. The stars sparkled in her dark eyes and the wind carried the scent of almonds. She reached down and taking the tiny gold fur between her palms, breathed into its hollow shell. At once the Prince saw the tiny creature come to life again. It twitched its pink snout, pricked up its ears, and scampered from the Princess’s hand.

The princess smiled at the young man. “I am the Princess Sophia and you have freed me from my enchantment. My father was a powerful magician. He died long ago

and fearing that my wealth would be a danger to me, he placed me into the little creature. He made the Guardians from paper, wheat, and water and breathed life into them so that they could protect me. Last, he set the tasks, hoping that one day there might be a man worthy of my love. You were the only one generous and brave enough to help a poor creature like me. And after all these years of waiting, I could not let the Guardians kill you for your loyalty.”

The Prince took her hand in his and glanced sadly at the desert. “I have no other wealth but my love to offer you,” he said.

Princess Sofia laughed and opened her arms wide to the castle. “This will be more than enough.”

Around them the desert changed, becoming rolling fields of green grass. Flowers bloomed and trees sprouted from the rocks, lifting graceful branches to the blue sky. Water bubbled up into the little springs and then flowed into a sparkling river. A thick carpet of moss and ferns grew around the castle while overhead, doves cooed in their nests beneath the castle eaves.

“Look over there,” said the Princess, “those are my subjects returning.”

On a road cut into a valley of ripening wheat, the Prince saw wagons pulled by teams of oxen. Herd boys and farmers shouted, their dogs barking as they guided their sheep and cattle over the hills. A woman waved a bright-colored scarf in greeting. Children skipped beside a musician who marched along the road playing a fiddle as people streamed toward the castle.

The Prince and Sofia were married soon after. For three days there was feasting and dancing for the bridal couple. So huge was the wedding cake, that even now there are still crumbs of it to be found at the back of every cupboard.