

Uproot

By Sarah Pinsker

There had been another lover once. She remembers (as if only hours before, rather than several hundred years) their last night, when the two of them together had raised the temperature in the city to the point where even iron began to sweat and shimmer; there had never, in the history of the world (much of which she knew firsthand), been a heat wave the equal of that which she and he had instigated. On that hottest of nights, she had combed his hair until his scalp prickled and he could ball up the sparks between his palms. He had tossed the little globe of lightning back and forth, left hand to right to left, until she had finally asked him to stop; it hurt her eyes.

She thinks of that man as she touches this one, marvelling that she can bear this body after the perfection of the other. When she had left the valley of Sorek, the night her first lover had knocked the temple to the ground, she had still had blue and purple imprints from his fingers' mapping of her body; her every bone ached and sung simultaneously. It had been easy to clutch the handful of his hair that she had slipped into her leather pouch as the rest had scattered on the bed; to clutch it and say that she could never possibly love again, or even go through the motions. The heat of him had spoiled her, like milk.

And yet, if she was truly spoiled, why was she here? She had never even seen this neighbor, this chicken farmer, before he had scaled her garden wall that very evening. He hadn't thought that she had observed him, or he would never have come. She had watched as he had placed his fingers and toes precisely where the mortar had already created crevices between the grey slabs of stone. Had watched how he landed, with great care and surprising delicacy, so as not to crush a single plant. How he had headed for the lettuce.

They turned their heads to watch him, though of course he didn't see. He obviously stole select leaves from their faces, randomly, so she would not notice (how easily most people presumed that such things were beneath her notice; as if her blood and sweat hadn't sweetened the soil and brought them up from the earth). She had stopped him only as he moved to leave her garden, at the point where he might have felt most confident about his little dalliance on her property. It was also the point where the wall dipped, and the hill upon which the peasant's cottage was built crested, so that his wife could look out the one tiny window and admire their reclusive neighbor's garden.

Delilah had placed a hand on his shoulder: it had served both to prevent him from climbing and from turning around. He had cried out, dropping the lettuce leaves (though there was no way that he had heard their silent screams). She had released her grip and let him turn around, then, and had been secretly pleased when his jaw gaped open at the sight of her.

She was still beautiful, and had no reason to doubt it. Samson had fallen in love with her for her face before he had known the rest of her, had crumbled as easily as the marble pillars had later fallen at his merest touch. She had not changed since then, not physically. Perhaps she has not changed at all: here she was again, beginning another deception. She had nothing to gain -or had she?- from this man, so unlike the one whose death had spun her and sent her spinning into the world for so long, until she had finally settled into the garden compound.

Delilah's daughter looks nothing like her. Her hair is blond, like the silk swathing an ear of corn, and her eyes are blue; her mother is dark haired, olive skinned. It is a common understanding among the townspeople that Delilah is a Gypsy; it is another common understanding that she steals babies and eats them. Rumors are nasty things, spreading and acquiring new twists and turns at every door, branching and twisting like vines. The grain of truth which germinates is seldom recognizable. She had bargained for a single infant, a baby girl, and had raised her carefully as she would a rose; not a single villager could have known that, for none knew that the child existed. She had never so much as tasted baby, let alone sought one out at mealtime.

There are only two people who might have commented, who might have risen to attack or defend her. They have long since vanished, packed up in the night after their baby was claimed, driving a donkey cart stacked with the select among their meager belongings. The husband's story might have betrayed a touch of ambivalence: fair was fair, and an arrangement had been made (and could he have spent one last night with her if he had found something else to trade?) The wife, if pressed to make a comment on the neighbor whom she had not even seen until the night her baby had been born and borne away, might speak in a different tone.

Delilah was a caring mother. She had taken care of the child as if her own, in the same seclusion that she had lived in for so long. The girl might have grown lonely at times, might have wondered about the distant shapes that she could see when she looked out her loft window, or when she scaled the wall to braid her hair and catch the breeze that did not always feel welcome in the stone-sealed garden below. None ever approached their compound, and though her mother had explained that there were other people out there, tilling soil and shilling wares in the marketplace, the girl could imagine no other companion but the woman to whose apparent age she grew closer every day. She was nineteen, and could not remember her mother looking any younger than she was now.

Delilah's daughter spent little time in her bedroom, the small space beneath the eaves of the tall stone tower. She liked to wander the various rooms, marvelling at the things her mother had collected in her wanderings: a piece of tattered shroud; a blue cloak; an ancient leather pouch; a tree the size of her fist; a locked glass case, the most gruesome display, containing a pair of eyes; a single raindrop, caught by surprise and suspended from the rafters; a comb made of ivory. Sometimes she asked her mother about the origins of one or another of these items, and listened intently, playing the strange names of people and places over her tongue.

When she was sixteen, her mother gave her the ivory comb. She had worn through many other brushes and combs by then: though her hair was soft and fine, it was as strong as rope, and tended towards knots and tangles, like the thorn hedges that circled the house. It had been cut

only once, when she was nine, and curious, and secretly followed her mother out of the compound on a market trip; Delilah had turned and spied her before they had travelled half a mile. Her mother had cried, and placed the shorn strands in a case in the parlor, and had not used the shears for several years afterward, so that the hedges grew taller and wilder than they had ever before.

The day Delilah gave Rapunzel the comb, she had told her daughter to kneel in front of the tall wooden chair in which she sat, and had slowly desnarled the blond cornsilk for the girl. Rapunzel closed her eyes and listened as her mother told her about the gift she was about to receive. She had bargained for it (she never told Rapunzel what she traded for her trinkets, and her daughter never thought to ask), received it from a merchant: a true Gypsy (which she was not) with hair as black as hers and skin as old and brown and worn as the leather pouch with which she had travelled since she had begun her journey. He had described to her the creature from which the ivory had been taken -a creature she later saw firsthand, and it was magnificent, with a soul as old as mine, my child- and carved and rendered. There was a relief of the elephant on the hilt of the comb, which Delilah traced lovingly. When her daughter's hair was straight and smooth again, she placed the comb in the girl's hands. Remember that everything comes from somewhere, my child, she said, and that everything has its cost.

Even three years later, the comb showed no sign of wear. Rapunzel liked to trace the figure of the tiny creature (which her mother said was in fact as large as the abandoned cottage that sat atop the hill beside their compound) with her fingers, and imagine touching its skin, though her mother had flinched when told of that dream. That year, the girl spent hours at a time perched upon the stone wall, watching the plants poke their heads up from the ground, gasping for air and proud of their achievement. Her mother's garden was second to only one, Delilah had told her, without false modesty, and was much more accessible than that place, which had been lost to humans long ago.

That summer had followed a spring in which it had rained all night, every night, and the sun appeared brightly each morning as if it had no inkling of what had passed in the hours before. The soil was soaked, not flooded, and it dried each day, with the result that the grass grew thicker and greener than it had in any season in Rapunzel's memory. Dandelions bloomed and feathered much faster than they could possibly be pulled, so that some might have been tempted to simply give up and let their land go to seed. Faced with such a futile task, many people might have despaired, but Rapunzel enjoyed kneeling in the black dirt and packing it beneath her fingernails, clawing down into the weed roots, so that the wild vegetation did not completely take over.

The vegetable gardens flourished as well. Not a single seed had failed to sprout, not a single stalk to thrive. Baskets overflowing with bell peppers made their way into the hall, to be laid out on the table in their resplendent greens, reds, oranges, and yellows, to be diced or stuffed or sliced in loving curves and placed in their mouths with eager fingers. Tomatoes with skins as taut as pregnant stomachs appeared on the vines nightly, already ripe. Carrots and onions and leeks were served at every meal, until mother and daughter glowed with a faint orange tinge, and could see even in pitch darkness.

Rapunzel complained about only one thing: the zucchini. Each section of the garden had its own idiosyncracies: in some places they had planted only green vegetables, in others, only roots such as potatoes and scallions, or corn and endive lettuce. Nevertheless, even when they had mapped out every row and every seed, when they could account for planting only cabbage and dill and beefsteak tomatoes, they would eventually discover that zucchini were flourishing between the other plants. Even the unplanned zucchini were tended, once they were noticed, and harvested in their turn. They were eaten raw, cooked, camouflaged in baked goods, until even her mother's cat Sarai did not bother to nibble at the bread.

Rapunzel had her own plot, which her mother had given her to take care of without help. It was not that she didn't want Delilah's help, or that she couldn't use it. It was just that Delilah had a way about her: not only did she know which seedlings took sun and which took shade, but plants would stretch and grow and reach tendrils out to wrap around her fingers; trees would sing to her as she passed between them, and even the breeze seemed to find a way down below the wall to play with her hair as she worked. Letting her mother help with her section was not cheating, but it seemed to take some of the fun out of the work. She had banned Delilah from her plot behind the orchard: she wanted to find her own talent, and to keep her plot free of zucchini.

It was on one of her more lazy days, when Rapunzel was enjoying the itch of grit forcing its way into the pores of her skin, the heat of the sun attacking her back through her blouse, and the tenacity of the weeds as they clung to the ground, that she found the hand. It did a lot to liven up her day. It was definitely a hand, and a large one. Four fingers and a thumb, connected to a palm, a wrist, a forearm...all sticking out of the dirt. The hand grasped what she had presumed to be a tomato stake, less than a quarter of its length up from the soil from which the limb had sprung. It appeared to have sprouted and clung like a vine, using the stake for support. It was green, with the skin of a zucchini.

But, really, it wasn't there. Really, it couldn't be. Her mind was playing tricks on her, her eyes manipulating her bored imagination. Or maybe it was some odd variety of cucumber, or finger squash, or some other creative gourd. Five bulbs in the wrong configuration: she could as easily have been standing there looking at a cauliflower with wings, or some anise shaped like a chipmunk. She had found such things, and odder, in her mother's garden. Though she had never seen a dead man, or a cemetery, or even a grave, her mother had not protected her from the knowledge of such things: they had held rites for baby larks which had fallen from the trees in the orchard. It was just that this particular hand looked human, like it was reaching up from death, the gradual emergence of a cruciferous zombie. It was only the hue, and the distinct, sedentary vegetable-ness of the appendage that kept Rapunzel from retreating to the house for Delilah. Maybe, she thought, some of Mother's touch has finally rubbed off.

Delilah tore a zucchini from the carrot bed it had infiltrated. It was a hot day, made hotter by the breath that she could feel on her neck, though there was nobody there when she looked. After a while, she recognized the feeling, remembered similar occasions. It was a hazard of long life: the past tended to stand a little closer than comfort dictated. She uprooted another unwanted plant, and another; she pretended that they were people she had known, and threw herself into the work until she no longer felt infringed upon, and was certain that she had scared her ghosts away.

Rapunzel watched the malformed zucchini all summer. She tended the area around it, ravaging the weeds, protecting it from the insects which managed to carve occasional welts and weals into her other plants. The forearm was followed by the rest of one arm, nearly to a shoulder; another hand emerged, a collarbone's breadth from the other. A head one day, she observed almost clinically; no breech birth, this one, as she had seen with one of Sarai's kittens. It was a male head, with wide cheekbones and jaw, but no hair. Its (his) eyes were closed, and no breath came from the nostrils, Rapunzel discovered when she grew brave enough to lie down in the dirt beside him, and place her hands upon his face. She gradually grew bolder, tracing the lines of his eyelids, his nose and mouth and chin, as if they were the elephant in the handle of her comb.

It tried her patience, watching and wondering what was being created in her secluded patch of garden. She was lucky that her mother had never asked to come look at her small plot and approve its progress. She still brought back vegetables every day, and avoided Delilah's eyes when asked if her day had gone well. Once her mother had remarked upon the length of time she was spending in the garden every day, and she made an effort to spend more hours inside from then on, making and repairing clothes. She found herself sewing a tunic that her mother looked upon with her usual critical eye; Delilah remarked that looked almost like a man's tunic, and Rapunzel abandoned clothesmaking for cleaning about the house.

When she did venture out to her garden, she observed the growth of her man-plant. A smooth green chest and back, eventually a full torso. A waist, buttocks, a penis and scrotum. Legs. How she wondered at every inch of it! It was like sculpture, familiar yet somehow unreal. It was such a beautiful color (the color of zucchini, yes, but also of peppers and romaine lettuce leaves, and deep corners of the orchard), and so cool to the touch, in such a hot season. She couldn't bear to sit in the house on the hot days which had made up so much of this summer, couldn't bear to touch cloth. She might have told her mother about this developing textural awareness, but she knew the way Delilah shuddered when she thought of skin.

It was almost complete now, and had long since crushed the stakes which it had first used to pull itself from the ground. It lay curled around itself, fetal, anchored by its buried feet. Rapunzel was tempted to tear them loose, to free the man-thing from the ground in its entirety; she chose to wait instead, in case she might damage him in her haste. She watched as it lay there, neither sleeping or breathing; perhaps alive though, as a vegetable is alive. She had seen the slight consciousness of some plants: of the delicate rapunzel lettuce for which she had been named, or the flowers which caressed her mother's hand with their petals. She touched its hand, its wrist and fingertips, but there was no response: not a tingle, not a return of pressure, not a pulse.

When his toes had finally cleared the ground, Rapunzel hesitantly reached down to separate them from the roots still tying him to the dirt from which he had emerged. What if it withered away without roots to feed and nurture it? No, she decided. It was more like a vegetable than a tree: it needed to be plucked, to be placed in the sun and allowed to ripen.

Allowed to ripen! On the hall table, with the other zucchinis, the tomatoes and radishes? She could not have said when she had decided that Delilah was not to be told about the thing, but she knew that there was no turning back; her mother would never believe that it had sprouted overnight. If only she could get him up to her room...her mother rarely ventured up there. Everyone needed a private space, she had said long ago. The compound itself had been hers alone for so many years, and there were several rooms where Rapunzel felt accepted but unwelcome, and Delilah did not begrudge her the attic bedroom.

When she was younger, and had broken one of her mother's baubles, Delilah had threatened to lock her into the tower room for good. Rapunzel could imagine no worse threat: to see the wall but not touch it, to see the blooms of the flowers and herbs but not smell them, except the faintest teasing breath brought through the window by the wind. She would not have wanted to spend a single moment locked alone in her room, but it seemed the perfect place to bring her plant.

When her mother left for the market that afternoon, Rapunzel had a plan. She was terrified at the deception which she was planning, although she had been practicing all summer. She was proud of it as well, for as a child she had rarely tried to cross her mother. She could count the times: the day her mother cut her hair, the times she had stolen trinkets or sweets and been banished to the attic. Best of all, the time she had scaled the wall while her mother was at market, having decided that exploring was safer than following. She had taken the same path, used almost the same crevices and crannies that her father had (though she could not have known), and explored the house that had belonged to her birth parents (though she could not have known that either).

The peasant and his wife had left much of their worldly wealth in the yard when they had driven away. The chickens: they had taken many, but could not fit (or manage) all of their chickens in the tiny donkey cart. The survivors (and there were many, for they took on the farmer's meager harvest themselves) grew wild and strong. Thieves might have taken the rest of their possessions, had there been anything: all that they had found when they walked through the open door was a table, two chairs, and a spinning wheel, all of which they used for kindling on the chill night that they spent there, roasting poultry and sleeping on the dirt floor. By the time Rapunzel explored the place, there was even less to see: only the charred bones of chickens and furniture. She had found a discarded pair of men's trousers in a corner, which she had taken to belong to the tenant, (though in fact one of the bandits had lost them, thrown them off and forgotten them the night that they had stayed, when a dark haired woman came through the door and asked them what they might trade to her, that night that they stumbled from the hovel dazed and scattered and dreaming of her.)

The peasant's house might actually be the best place to bring her giant gourd, Rapunzel now reflected briefly, before dismissing the thought. While it was true that her mother would never find it there, the consequences of being caught scaling the wall (for it was only by a matter of minutes that she had made it back the other time, with the pair of trousers and a particularly brightly colored chicken feather) seemed to her far greater than those of being discovered tending to an overripe zucchini in her bedroom. That was why she crept into the parlor that morning -crept because it seemed proper to use stealth, not because of any risk involved while

her mother was still on the six mile walk to market. She carefully unlatched the glass case covering the blond coil of her shorn hair. She draped them across her shoulders where they lay like a sated snake, replaced the glass over the bare platform, and climbed the stairs to her tower room.

The tower really wasn't a tall one, though it stood out against the countryside like a finger from a fist, and it seemed so when one was lugging something heavy up to the top. Rapunzel was sure that her task would have been easier from a lesser height. She might even have considered wrangling and wrestling the thing up the stairs if she had not been afraid of bruising it, or getting caught halfway by her mother. The method she had chosen was best: the back of the tower, where her garden lay, where her window faced, was shielded from the road. That was why she had stolen her own hair: it took quite a while to weave and braid it, but eventually it formed a rope, of roughly ten meters' length.

She tied one end of the braid to her heavy oak chair, and threw the other end out the window, watching it land with a soft thump in the brambles. The thorn bushes would be the greatest hazard in her plan: she had no intention of letting her prize be scratched by the sharp spikes that hedged the house. She had pulled the braid tight enough that no time needed to be spent untangling it from the bushes. She worked efficiently, dragging the green man (he was not nearly as heavy as she had feared, nor as heavy as she thought a real man might be) to within hair's reach, tying the end of the braid around him like a sling, under his arms and across his chest, carefully between his legs. She tied the end back into the braid, so that the construction was more similar to a macrame chair than a noose: she feared that too much pressure might result in an amputation, a zucchini arm lying loose and helpless, spilling pale green seeds like blood into the thorn bushes. She didn't want to see inside him, most of all, to see that he was only plant.

That was why she hoisted him to her bedroom so carefully. The first pull was the hardest, bringing him into the air, up and over the brambles with one heave, to sway and swing, butting gently into the stone tower. The amount of strength it took for each successive advancement was what made those the hardest, as well. The entire maneuver was taxing for Rapunzel, who had never had need to pull anything harder than was necessary to dislodge a deeply rooted weed. Eventually, though, there was a heaped green body on her floor. She untangled him from the hair, which had padded his landing like the straw bedding of a stall, and returned it to its place in the parlor.

And what could she do with her great vegetable now? She positioned the bed where it would receive most of the afternoon's sunlight, and laid him gently across it.

It took three days for him to begin to ripen. Three days, and for each Rapunzel woke up clutching the solid green chest, lying across a cool green arm. Three days in which she worked to reposition the soil in her garden, so that the holes from which the man had sprung were not so obvious, so that the tracks his heels had made when she dragged him closer to the tower looked more like the tracks of a wheelbarrow. On the third day, she invited her mother to inspect her crop, and watched warily as Delilah poked among the asparagus and the parsley, clucked and

hmmmed, and finally nodded her approval. I can see that you work hard back here, Delilah had said, dissipating a summer of fears.

Three days, and on the fourth, Rapunzel woke to discover that the body next to her might be just a little softer than the day before. Softness alone might have worried her, as rot was her primary concern for the green man. But - there was also a touch of pinkness, which had definitely not been there before, and which was not, to her knowledge, a common symptom of decay.

With each passing day after that, Rapunzel watched his skin grow rosier. Dark hair began to sprout from newly opened pores: on his head, his face, his chest and legs and genitals. On the seventh day, she wondered whether it was appropriate for her to lie with the skin-toned, hirsute, almost-man; she considered dragging him to the chair, propping him there. Her mother's warnings rattled in her mind, though she had often wondered why Delilah felt them necessary, since she never let her daughter out of the compound in any case. She was already breaking several of her mother's rules: it depended on whether her plant was considered a man (she was beginning to think so) and whether omission was equated to lying in her mother's mind. In the end, she chose not to move him, merely because she had become accustomed to the feel of him beside her. As a concession, she dressed him in the peasant's (thief's) trousers, and the tunic which her mother had decreed too masculine.

She had chosen not to move him, and therefore woke to the sound of his breathing beside her. Rapunzel lay still for several moments, for an eternity: while she had somewhat anticipated the turn of events, she was also at a loss for what to do next. In the end, Her curiosity won over prudence, and she rolled over to study his face. His nostrils and mouth, previously solid to his skin, had broken open and begun to function, and his chest to rise and fall: like bellows, pressing air out through the nose, accepting it through the mouth. She noticed that his ears were no longer sealed, as well: it was as if a membrane- a caul- had been lifted from his body, as if he had just accepted an invisible cue to breathe.

Really, he looked like a complete human now, except for his eyes. His eyes were sealed; he didn't flinch when she gently unpeeled the flesh lids and long lashes to find his eyes were still green and smooth, zucchini skinned. She wondered whether there was a final stage that had yet to take place, or if her vegetable man (her man, no longer green) had a birth defect, like Sarai's sixth toe, or the kitten born without eyes in one of her early litters. He responded now when she touched him (anywhere but his eyes), sometimes with a shudder, sometimes with a sigh.

There were more mornings then, more discoveries. A day when she woke in the middle of the night to find him clutching her arm; another when she came back from a day of gardening (how mundane now) to find him standing in the sunlight, photosynthesizing, or perhaps trying to remember how.

And the day she woke to find that he was stroking her side with his cool fingertips, his blind face turned towards hers as if seeing through closed eyes. It was then that she kissed him, and then fell back again, startled at her own impetuosity. It was his lips that sought hers out

next, and she realized that she couldn't breathe with his mouth was on hers, tasting of zucchini, and his entire weight, now more than that of seeds and skin, pressing down on top of her.

Her mother's jaded stories had given her less fear than disfavor for the idea of sleeping with a man (for her mother had left out the first lover, and mentioned only the inadequacies of those that followed). Except that this was not just a man, but the subject of an entire summer's fantasies: she felt a bond with him, deep as his own roots in her garden. Besides, how many rules had she already broken? Really all but the cardinal one. Besides, it was not as if she had invited in some random suitor who had called up to her tower window on a hot summer's night. She had never even talked to anyone besides her mother, just as Delilah had wanted it to be. This was infinitely different: not a real man, but one she knew intimately nonetheless. She bit into his shoulder once, but released him when she tasted vegetable flesh instead of human.

After that, Rapunzel tried to be careful only to pull him to her when her mother was at market, until eventually she forgot entirely that it was a deception, or ceased to care.

Delilah was tending to her own garden when she heard her daughter call out. It was not the type of sound she heard very often these days: even the mixing of voices at the marketplace was often too cacophonous, enough to send her reeling. Really, her last twenty years had been quiet. There had been the screaming of the baby, of course, and the screaming of the peasant woman, both during childbirth and moments afterwards, when Delilah had arrived in time to sever the umbilical cord and present her own breast to the little one's mouth. There had been times as her daughter grew up, as well: a bee-stung backside, a fall from a tree, a burnt finger, the hair-cutting. She could recognize those sounds in an instant, like any mother; this one too, but she had not expected it.

She ran into their home, up the stairs. She was still carrying her pruning shears, she realized as she ascended the tower. Afterwards, she would find that it was fitting. What had ultimately been her weapon, her tool, both now and in the past? She pushed open the door to her daughter's room, to find Rapunzel in her bed, with a man on top of her. She screamed, a mixture of shock, rage and disappointment.

It was the first time that such an aural assault had ever hit his ears, though Delilah could not have known that this was the reason he staggered from her daughter's bed. He made it to his feet, clutching the sides of his head. He stumbled blindly (for he was still blind) across the room. The windowsill hit him at the kneecaps, but his momentum (and one strong push from Delilah) kept him going over the edge, down the side of the tower, and into the hedge below.

Delilah turned from the direction in which he had fallen, even before she heard the thick sound of his landing. Her daughter was still on the bed, crying softly now. She did not try to soothe the girl, did not want to find out who the man was, how he had gotten there. It had not been a rape, she was fairly sure. She gave up on Rapunzel and descended the tower, to see what shape the man was in.

He had landed in the bramble hedge, below the window from which he had fallen. He had flattened a bush, lay on top of it now, so that a bed of thorns cushioned his body. He was

beautiful, she saw, solid looking, as if made of something stronger than most, qualities she recalled from her own lover, long ago. He was bleeding, out of his ears (though the blood looked so dark as to be green), and his eye sockets were open and empty. They must have been scratched out by the thorns, Delilah thought, though she did not see them anywhere.

For the first time in twenty years, true doubt seized her. What had she done to her daughter, what had she denied her? She had only sought to protect Rapunzel from the seasons of loneliness which she herself had gone through: the dull ache of realization that came from knowing that perfection had been crushed between the pillars of the temple, that it was her fault, and that there was no way, ever to replace it. The more she had wandered, the more lost she had felt. It was only this tower, this garden, this child that had somewhat filled her deserted heart. What was so wrong with keeping these feelings from the girl? If she had never known another person, she would never have known love, except that between mother and child. If she had never known the other sort of love, she would never have known pain and loss.

But now, this was even worse. Yes, Rapunzel had taken a lover. But who was to say that she would have betrayed him, or lost him, or that he would have left her? She had seen so many unscarred couples, and felt only bitterness. Were the chicken farmer and his wife still together? If not, it was her fault. As would be the death of her daughter's lover, imminent now.

She thought of one thing that she might do, then. She put down her pruning shears, eased the young man to the ground, and left him bleeding beside the tower; ran inside. Up into the parlor, where the story of her past centuries had been condensed into dusty souvenirs. To the only case which she had kept sealed, the most gruesome and the most sentimental: long brass key into deep brass lock, and the glass top was released. Back to the dying man, with Samson's eyes moist in her palm.

It took almost too long for her to convince her daughter to come down from her bedroom: it was only her conviction that he would die, and soon, that in the end brought the girl down the stairs and out into the bright sunlight. Rapunzel could feel her mother's eyes upon her as she looked him over, though she knew that Delilah didn't know what she had gasped about: first, that he looked to be in great pain (for he had never cracked a smile, never demonstrated an emotion of any kind, never even made a sound); second, that he was bleeding green blood from his ears (she had never been sure whether it was in fact human blood that she could feel pulsing when she held his wrists); third, that he was looking at her, with real eyes (but eyes that she had seen before, and recognized as easily in his face as in their parlor display). Rapunzel was not entirely sure what had inspired her mother to fill the empty eyes.

Delilah walked away as Rapunzel touched her dying lover's face, as they looked at each other for the last (first) time. She was not there, then, to see Rapunzel take up her pruning shears and cut a lock from his hair, and the tip from a finger. Inside her clipping, it was green and abundantly seeded. She was a good gardener, perhaps better than her mother, planting to build instead of to repair.