

TRAVELING INCOGNITO

A Fairy Tale

By

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Traveling incognito had its benefits. Enchantress Rose, of the House of Beaumont, smirked at the fops playing croquet on a manor lawn bordering the footpath from Thagard to the royal city of Roulen. She lifted a gnarled, wart-covered hand in greeting. They merely sneered and turned away in disgust. Rose's smile broadened. No one had attempted to flirt with her all afternoon, not since her transformation from one of the most beautiful women in the kingdom to a hag.

Ingenious. Impetuous, but ingenious. Even Count Raston would leave her alone as she was. The fool had actually thought he could force her to marry him! If only turning men into frogs hadn't been banned—too many squished, or eaten by cats, before even sighting a princess.

Rose shuffled on, not caring that she had to straighten her crooked hag's back to see her path between the snow-topped mountains piercing the sky like crooked teeth. Leaving her coach in Thagard had not been the work of genius. That had been Maid Helga's suggestion.

“Let me travel on in your place, my lady,” Helga had said, “while you take the short cut through the forest. We'll fool that charlatan Philippe, I mean, Count Raston.” So kind of Helga to leave a false trail for her.

After a few hours of uphill trudging, Rose collapsed on a broad rock. She was beginning to have serious doubts as to Helga's directions. She pulled out the knapsack Helga packed for her and studied its contents—bread, cheese, water, and the silver mirror that popinjay Raston had given her. Why on earth had Helga packed that? A reminder of her disguise? Of Raston and her reason for this uphill jaunt?

Rose harrumphed. Not even a pastry or napkin. Or money. But no matter. She was an enchantress of the House of Beaumont. She could command hospitality at any manor she passed. She could use magic, but that would break the spell of her disguise, and how long would it take

to find another hag to give her a strand of hair for the doppelganger spell? Her servants in Roulen were expecting a hag, if she came as herself, they might suspect an imposter. After all, what was a little hunger and weariness to a Beaumont?

Rose marched ahead, fingering the enchanted rose pinned to her cloak. A sign of her heritage, its beauty always lifted her spirits. But two days later, even the rose's beauty couldn't lift her spirits, much less her feet. But the sight of a castle turret did.

Dirt puffed onto the frayed hem of Rose's dress as she shuffled faster over the forest path. Crunching gravel on the castle drive and scuffling over the stones to the front door, on she went, drawn to that majestic edifice. As if the castle sensed her approach, the door opened, and a handsome prince stepped out to welcome her. A full meal, bath, and carriage were within her grasp, she knew.

But suddenly the prince jerked back, his lips pulling away from his teeth in an expression of revulsion equal to that of the fops she had passed earlier. Alarmed, Rose spun around, searching for the monster that must have crept up behind her. But nothing was amiss on the castle's immaculate lawn or drive. Then it struck her—her disguise. Smiling to herself at the brilliance of it once again, Rose turned back to the prince and curtsied, reminding herself to tone down her request to match her disguise.

“Your Highness,” she said meekly, “might I have a cup of water and a night's rest in your kitchen?”

He huffed and waved her aside, his bright blue eyes scarcely daring to look at her. “We don't serve hags here.”

Rose reached for her wand. Of all the callous ... *Calm down, Rose. Remember the trouble you got into with the Enchanters Guild over the man you turned into a pig.* And it wasn't as if he was likely to be eaten by a cat or squished.

How could she persuade the prince? The lovely red rose caught her eye, and she held it out. "Not even for an enchanted rose?"

"Don't be silly. I have a garden full of roses."

"But this one's ..." Rose clamped her mouth shut. He wouldn't care if she starved. She had been working up to offer him the mirror, but not now. Disguise and Enchanters Guild be hanged. The man needed a lesson. Before the prince had time to turn up his nose at Rose again, she'd transformed back into her beautiful self and turned him into a great, fat, hairy beast.

"And so you shall remain until you learn to love." She shoved the rose in his face. "You have until this wilts. Good luck." She stomped away, feeling very refreshed, but only made it a few feet. The prince had such mournful blue eyes. He was bound to be lonely by the time a woman showed up, and he didn't dare leave the castle lest some frightened villager shoot him. Was there anything she could ...? *Ah.* Rose pulled out Raston's mirror, cast a seeing spell upon it, and handed it to the prince. "This mirror will show you whatever you wish to see."

She hoped. She snatched it back. "Show me Helga."

Helga appeared, in vivid, magic mirror color. So did Raston. Rose gripped the mirror until her knuckles popped. Helga was wearing one of *her* dresses and was *sitting* on *Raston's lap*. They were laughing.

Black spots dotted Rose's vision. There had to be some other explanation. She glanced at the mirror again.

Nope.

She tossed the mirror to the prince-beast. He was only practice compared to what she'd do to Raston and Helga. And there was no need for the Enchanters Guild to know.

After all, traveling incognito had its benefits.

The End