



The Witch and the Horse

Thieves

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Retold Fairy Tales

The Bensens' reputation preceded their arrival. Dellan was a small peaceful kingdom, and horse thieves were not common, particularly when they came in the form of an attractive young couple. But the Bensens had the foresight or perhaps the dumb luck to come across a village that didn't ask too many questions when a husband and wife arrived with seven horses emblazoned with the royal crest, and nothing else of value. This village had seen much stranger things; several years earlier a Witch had set up shop there and had wreaked havoc with her magic.

The Witch didn't see it that way, of course. She thought she was helping the villagers by offering poultices for their wounds, medicines for their ills, and so on. She thought they would be thankful for her help. The villagers were more frightened than grateful though, so the Witch built a cottage on the edge of town, and kept mostly to herself. She spent her days tending to her garden and conducting medical research, in the hopes that one day the villagers would recognize her value.

After selling the horses, the Bensens built a house next to the Witch. At first, she delighted in having new neighbors, even criminal ones, such had been her loneliness. The Bensens were terrible neighbors though; they fought loudly from morning to nightfall and threw things out of windows when they were angry, which was often. Their thieving days were not behind them either, nearly every house in the village claimed to have

something go missing after the Bensens visited. After a while, the local constables couldn't ignore the trouble, and Mr. and Mrs. Bensen spent nearly every other month in and out of the community jailhouse for one or another of their misdeeds.

The Bensens had the good sense not to steal from the Witch, at least until Mrs. Bensen became pregnant. Instead of asking the Witch directly for food, which she would have happily given away, Mr. Bensen climbed the fence between their houses and began digging up her vegetables. The Witch watched him steal by the light of the full moon and decided to let him take the vegetables if his family was in such need. She resolved to discuss the issue in the light of day though.

When the Witch arrived at their door the next morning, Mr. Bensen fainted from fright and Mrs. Bensen began sobbing.

"Please don't hurt us," she whimpered. "It was an accident."

The Witch was tired of this reaction; everybody always assumed she was going to hurt somebody just because she was a Witch. It was disappointing and disheartening, but she tried to get over it as well she could. What was new was the brazenness of the lie.

"It wasn't an accident. You don't accidentally dig up somebody's vegetables. It's a very time-intensive process."

Mrs. Bensen couldn't come up with another defense though. She groaned, and the Witch realized her baby was about to arrive. Despite her dislike of the Bensens, she knew that she had to do the right thing and help. She'd only read about delivery in books, but she knelt down and helped Mrs. Bensen through the birth as best she could. A few hours later, a baby girl arrived.

Something wasn't quite right though; the Witch could sense it, even if she couldn't quite place her finger on what it was. Though she yearned to be home with her research and done with this family, she pushed those feelings down.

"Could I take a tiny blood sample from the baby?" she asked the Bensens. "I just want to run some tests to make sure she's healthy."

The Bensens exchanged a frightened look. Finally, Mr. Bensen said, "Fine, take the baby's blood for your

rituals. But don't hurt me or the Mrs."

"That's not..." the Witch started to protest, then realized she was wasting time. The baby needed her help. She took the blood sample from the baby and brought it back to the laboratory she had in her cottage. When her tests completed, she gathered some supplies and returned to the Bensens' house.

She found Mr. and Mrs. Bensen eating her vegetables and laughing while the baby lay crying on a table. The Witch frowned and put on a surgical mask and gloves. The villagers thought she was a monster, but these people were much worse. She wrapped the baby in a sanitized blanket that she had brought from her home, and began bouncing her gently.

"Hey," Mr. Bensen said, pointing an accusing finger. "You said you'd leave us alone if we gave you the baby's blood. And what's with the mask?"

"Unfortunately, I have some bad news," the Witch said, trying to maintain a polite manner. It was hard; she'd had so little practice with conversation. "Your daughter appears to have a deficient autoimmune system."

The Bensens looked at her blankly.

The Witch rephrased, "She's very, very sick. She needs to avoid pathogens—I mean people and animals with germs. She'll require much more attention and caretaking than you might have expected."

Mr. Bensen rolled his eyes. "The Bensens are good, healthy people. No baby of mine could be sick!"

"If it's because she's crying, I heard babies do that," Mrs. Bensen added. "You're just supposed to ignore it."

"No," the Witch said, getting frustrated. "There are things in blood that most people have that she does not. She is sick. I brought these masks and gloves for you to put on to protect her..."

The Bensens shook their heads.

"I don't want a sick baby," Mrs. Bensen said.

"Me either," Mr. Bensen said.

The Witch was about to argue further when a knock came at the door.

“This is the Royal Police,” a voice shouted outside the door. “We have word of horse thieves in the neighborhood.”

Mr. and Mrs. Bensen sat up, their eyes wide.

“If we sneak out through the window, maybe they won’t catch us,” Mr. Bensen suggested.

“We could hide out in the woods,” Mrs. Bensen said.

“This baby can’t live out in the woods,” the Witch protested. “She’s too sick.”

“Then you keep her,” Mrs. Bensen said. Without another word, she and Mr. Bensen hopped out the window and into the woods.

The Royal Police burst through the door and into the Bensens’ house.

Wordlessly, the Witch pointed to the woods in the direction where the Bensens had run. She didn’t bother to stay to find out what happened to them. Her mind was already focused on the task before her, building a safe and clean home that could protect a sick little girl. Her tiny new friend, who wouldn’t fear or despise her. She gazed down at the baby adoringly.

“I think I’ll name you Rapunzel,” she said.

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