

The Knight and the Witch

based on an idea by Zach P.

Once upon a time in the village of Reicros there lived a witch. She took part in every aspect of life in the community, always doing good. She made houses for the poorest people and tried to provide food to all those who were suffering from famine. As the winters had been harsh, and the harvests had been insufficient, she helped all inhabitants to feed themselves. The villagers admired her, but they were also suspicious of her because she was different and had some magical powers, and also as she lived in a mysterious hideaway, surrounded by a thick fog which never seemed to lift.

One day, a stranger with a strange allure approached, riding a slim horse with brown spotted coat. His overcoat, embroidered with coats of arms of the most illustrious royal families, indicated that he belonged to the nobility. A steel helmet covered his face. One could only perceive his eyes of fire, through the tiny holes of its visor. When he saw the witch, he stopped, climbed down from his horse, and drew his sword. The witch was terrified. She knew he was coming for her so she hid herself under her cloak of invisibility. The knight was surprised by her sudden disappearance, but he continued to look for her, searching in the empty houses of the village and shouting in his cavernous voice, "This time you will not escape me, cursed sorceress! And as for you, faithful subjects of the king, do not forget where your loyalty should lie. I hold ALL of you responsible for her disappearance. Defend her and you will be punished". He returned his blade to its sheath, climbed up on his steed, and turned back to his fortified camp. The villagers no longer felt safe. Their anger rose and they all pointed at the witch, as the person responsible for the misfortunes that threatened to befall on them. "I have to find a way to bring peace," said the witch to herself. But the rumours were already going around: "the knight looked threatening" murmured one of them, "he drew his sword when he saw her", mumbled another. "Something very strange is going on, I fear. I knew it - I knew she was strange and that we could not trust her". Feeling that the whole village was against her, she decided to go into hiding in the forest. She packed her belongings and left the house.

As soon as she entered the forest, she heard the birds stop singing. The breeze was blowing. Everything seemed to be watching her. As she walked, she saw the hind legs of a horse, so she hid behind a tree. Someone was whispering. She moved closer to determine where this mysterious language came from of which she could only understand fragments. The horse backed up when he heard a branch cracking. He had golden wings. She looked for the owner but she saw no-one.

She could come to only one conclusion: it was the horse that mumbled! The witch was speechless. So it was this Pegasus that had been speaking all alone. 'It's unbelievable', she thought to herself, 'the magic of this place will never cease to amaze me!'. The animal was intelligent and noticed someone was approaching. The horse was about to charge, when he noticed that the one spying on him had an innocent and pure look in her eyes. So it paused and said: "you shouldn't stay here, it's dangerous". The witch was stunned. She herself was endowed with magical powers but she never thought she would one day speak to a horse: "Who are you?" she asked the horse. "You have a gift that is rather rare among animals! It must be exciting for you?"

"I'm Palatine. It's a pleasure to meet you. Who are you? Visitors are rather rare in this region as the forest has the reputation of being haunted. Superstitions have a way of spreading and cause paradise to become a desolate place for invented ghosts."

"I am a witch. I've never had a name."

"You didn't?" said the horse, who was becoming intrigued by the encounter.

"I'm trying to bring peace to my village," she replied with hesitation. "I'm looking for a knight, maybe you have seen one? His eyes are worn away by anger and hatred. We have a long-standing conflict to resolve. I have avoided it for far too long."

"This is starting to sound interesting, young sorceress, tell me more! I believe I may know that of which you speak".

The witch closed her eyes and the memories came back to her. Before the animal's eyes, the figures she had long forgotten began to come to life in a strange mist. She saw her parents whose evil spell had attacked the king's castle, she saw knights in elaborate armor chasing them, setting villages alight, hunting down the innocent villagers, wanting to find those who had committed this crime, capturing and torturing all who practiced magic in the region – the cruel prince with the evil eyes promising to annihilate 'all evil beings'. She felt a shiver run down her spine as the horse looked at her stunned: "It's a very sad story but let me help you. Despite all your powers I can see that you are still not powerful enough to defeat the one they call "the Heartless Knight" alone. You will need courage because his eyes alone can turn you into stone.

"Really?" replied the witch. "But ... I have no money. I could not reward your help."

"Do not worry! Come on! Climb up! I don't know if you have flown before but believe me, it's an unforgettable experience."

"All right, then!" said the witch, "jumping on his back."

"Prepare for take-off!"

He dashed through the woods and rushed towards a void from which he leapt without the slightest hesitation. Then everything seemed to become calm. Its huge wings floated through the sky. The witch could feel the air hitting her face while the horse enjoyed drawing circles in the azure sky.

"The view is magnificent!"

"I know, it's incredible! You see I may not have magical powers but flying is almost worth more, isn't it?"

"That's right! Maybe we could swap!" she laughed.

"Palatine," she asked, "what is that object blazing like a moon?" pointing down to a metal structure amid the trees. "I have no idea." said the winged horse, changing his direction towards the wood which he seemed to rule over from on high. When they got close to the tree, they noticed that it was an open vault. She got down from her divine mount and looked inside. It was empty. There was only a mirror with the inscription "All that counts is what's inside". She scratched her head and thought: "I feel we won't get rich today... but maybe ... Yes! That's it! That's what will bring us peace".

The horse observed her attentively. She continued: "I may look scary, but I am not, I help others and heal them". Then Palatine laughed and replied: "Perhaps it is you that should be taken care of!". His emerald gaze had been lit up by her laughs, and then she changed her mind: "It's still unfair. I never used black magic. I have spent my life rescuing people and trying to build a better world. But I still have to hide. It's not fair. We have to show the villagers what I really am. This is the meaning of this message, in this box in the middle of nowhere. It is telling me that I should accept who I am. I will no longer let the rumours of the knights ruin my life". It was then that they heard a huge crash, shaking the earth of the woods. The young witch shouted: "What is it? What do you see?". The horse flapped

its wings and rose off the ground. "The heavens are red like burning embers. The armoured men have set fire to the villages".

"It's not possible! she said to herself. It's all my fault. Palatine! You have to help me! They're going to annihilate the village and reduce it to ashes to find me".

He hesitated a few moments. An old wound on his side reminded him of ancient disasters caused by fire and embers. He came back down and said he has no desire to experience war again. "You have the heart of a good witch. I have left the world of men because they are ferocious and consumed by the hatred they are incapable of taming. But you can bring love back to these desolate lands. Hop on! it's time to face your destiny. Then she jumped on the winged horse's back and he carried her off into the sky of sparkling solitary stars and landed near the smouldering remains of the fires.

"I will not abandon you!" she roared like a heroic warrior.

The inhabitants couldn't believe it.

"It's her! It's the witch! She has come back to defend us", they exclaimed gratefully. But as she attacked the royal forces with powerful spells - balls of fire and electric spirals, casting "abracadabras" to the skies - she was struck by an arrow from the Heartless Knight. She stumbled and fell through the air like a stone into an abyss. Palatine swirled and tried to catch her, but he only managed to break her fall.

"I've got you now!" thought the Knight with a sense of accomplishment. He approached the young witch and arrived on the scene before her animal companion.

"Cursed witch! You're finally going to pay for what you've done!"

He removed his helmet. His gaze burned with a strange fury. He drew his sword and struck. However, his hand was held back by an invisible power. She began to open her eyes.

"I have done nothing", she murmured. "I cannot be punished for the crimes of my parents".

The young man could no longer contain his rage: "Your species must disappear! We cannot coexist with beings like you!"

She managed to straighten herself up but she was injured. She found within her the last bit of strength to support her because she believed in her duty.

"My parents believed that they had been given powers to dominate the world but I learned that they have a completely different role to play: to help and to heal. As the sun brings warmth to men, I must radiate Goodness. But you, whose hatred seeks to separate what I have tried to unite and assemble through love, you, I must either convince or confront!"

The knight threw himself upon her with such madness that the witch managed to avoid the blows raining upon her. "Anger can't win out over good thought". The knight began to run out of breath while that she faded and reappeared again. Finally, he collapsed before her. "If you truly have honour, if your goodness is such that you present it then ... spare me".

She approached him and whispered to him: "I am not like you. I want harmony. I loathe war and conflict that tears at the hearts of the people. It is Love that is needed." "It is necessary to resist cruel and imperious cries of Hate. Go, Prince. Live with your people. Learn to work, to build, to protect yourselves. So that one day you will deserve your name of 'lord'". He stood up as if light itself had addressed him with these divine words and climbed onto his now calm horse.

“ It is now your turn to reign, young lady! You will make an excellent leader! You have what I should have forged in me and which I have lost in the mists of vengeance. Farewell”.

He went as Palatine arrived, happy to see that her little girl had survived. "Come on Palatine! Take me to the village and let's start rebuilding". She had changed. Now, she was ready to lead. Returning to the village, she was met with the cheers of joy and it is thus that a sublime kingdom was born out of the embers of darkness and so will it prosper for eternity.