

The Boy and the Witches

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In the morning on the last day of February, a handsome young stranger knocked on the door of the old red house on a hill outside a village on the edge of a forested kingdom. The door was opened by a dark-eyed witch of a certain age, who greeted the stranger with a smile and showed him into the parlor without hesitation. He explained that he was their cousin Sam from the town of Skywater, sent by their uncle to stay with them while he traveled. The boy proffered a letter from his father to prove his point.

He was a beautiful young man, not yet of age, with short russet hair and innocent eyes the color of maple syrup. The witch, whose name was Juna, was mildly disappointed to find he was a relative, and went to fetch her sisters. She found Cina in the washroom pressing flowers between pages of thin parchment. Cina was always interested in family and happily went to greet their cousin. Juna found her eldest sister, Suna, in the chicken yard, bandaging up the leg of a hen who had come out on the wrong end of a pecking skirmish. Suna pursed her lips and said she'd be in shortly.

That night they dined on chicken stuffed with mushrooms and wild rice. Afterward, Cina helped Sam make up the bed in the parlor and bid him a pleasant rest. By midnight, all were sleeping except Suna, who sat by the fire in her rocking chair gazing at the coals, wondering what Sam was hiding.

The next morning, Cina was stringing peas in the garden when she noticed people out on the road from the village. There was seldom anyone coming their way from town, let alone multiple people. She stood up and smoothed her hair under her hat as a young woman came over the rise and walked up to the house. Since Juna was already opening the front door, Cina went to the rise and looked down over the road. There were four more people approaching, girls by the looks of them, and now another having just left the village making five. Curious, Cina walked down to meet the nearest girl.

“May I help you?” she asked.

“I’ve come to ask after your houseguest. He passed through town yesterday and mentioned he would be staying out here.”

“Is that why they are all coming here, too?” she asked, pointing down the road at the others.

“I couldn’t say,” said the young woman, glancing at them with a furrowed brow.

Within an hour the parlor was full of female visitors fawning over Sam. For his part, he took it in good spirits, as though this were no irregular occurrence. Cina was on her feet the whole time, bringing raspberry lemonade and sugar cookies for the ladies as they were all depleted from their long walk. Juna was nowhere to be found. Suna stood leaning on the doorjamb, silently observing.

“There’s a whole line of ‘em outside,” Juna said in Suna’s ear, making her jump.

“We need to put a stop to this,” Suna told Juna over her shoulder. “Go into town and buy a goat. Be quick.”

Juna shrugged and went out around the back to the shed where she extracted an ancient bicycle with a basket on the front. She tucked up her skirts and mounted the bike, wobbling unsteadily until she built up a little speed and went sailing down the hill to town. Along the way, she passed dozens of girls heading toward the house and she marveled that the kingdom had so many to offer.

Meanwhile, Suna went out to the front porch and told the girls waiting there that they would have to come back tomorrow and instructed them to inform all the others coming along the road similarly. By dusk the last of the callers had gone home and Cina flopped down in a chair, exhausted. Sam brought her some lemonade and cookies with an apologetic smile. Juna arrived home with a baby goat stuffed in the bicycle basket and Suna bid her bring it into the parlor.

"So, Sam, what's going on here?" Suna asked, arms folded beneath her bosom.

"I beg your pardon?" Sam replied with poorly disguised guilt.

"The letter's not from your father and we are plagued with enchanted girls."

Sam hung his head. "How did you know about the letter?"

"I know your father's hand and he is as parsimonious with his words as he is with his coin."

Sam smiled to himself at that. "I can answer for myself but not for the young ladies. That seems to happen wherever I go."

"Answer then," Suna demanded.

"My father has betrothed me to woman I do not wish to wed."

"And you prefer another, no doubt," Juna interposed, evincing a glare from Suna.

"That I do," Sam admitted.

"What is your plan then?" Suna asked.

"To absent myself until I come of age and then return to wed as I please."

"What is the problem with your betrothed and your beloved?" inquired Cina, reviving herself.

Sam scowled. "My betrothed's only good quality is her wealth, which is my beloved's only deficit."

Suna stared at him dubiously. She knew her uncle, who was not an unreasonable man. Sam looked abashed, unable to withstand her scrutiny, and continued.

"My father claims my love is brainless as a bramble, plain as pig tracks and destitute as dirt."

"You poor boy," Cina declared in sympathy, resolving to aid him.

"Hmph," Suna declared, equally resolved. "Juna, the goat, please."

Juna came forward with the squirming black form in her arms, holding it like so much kindling.

Then Suna looked hard at Sam, causing him to sway like a mouse in front of a cobra. Finally she found what she was looking for, she having the keenest eyes of the three sisters. A charm had been laid on the boy, hidden in his ear. It was to attract affection and repel danger, a mother's charm. Sam's mother was of the blood and long gone from this life; it must have been a parting gift before she died. Suna deftly plucked it out of Sam's ear and popped it into the goat's. The goat bleated pitifully until Cina took it from Juna and sat with it in her lap, petting it to calmness and finally to sleep. Sam was unaware of what had happened and was led off to bed, unprotesting.

That night after dark, Suna prepared a spell to cast away Sam's affections for his beloved and focus them on the more prudent match. Cina, in her own room, prepared a similar spell, but in the reverse, to rid Sam's destiny of the betrothed and clear the way for his beloved. Juna was busy casting her own spell to get both girls out the picture and let Sam make a fresh start. By morning, no trace of either girl could be found anywhere in Sam's future.

Cina was on the front porch feeding the goat from a baby bottle full of milk when the first young lady arrived that day. The girl cooed at the goat, petting and doting over it and Cina gave it to her to take home. Ecstatic, the girl took the goat in her arms and marched back down the road without a second thought for Sam. One by one, the approaching girls were distracted from their plans by the wonderful kid until they had all turned to follow it back to town.

Sam, as yet unaware of his altered fate, asked if there was something he could do to repay the sisters for the trouble he had caused them. Suna suggested he diagnose the problem with their plow and outline possible solutions as it was soon to be planting time. With Sam safely out in the field, the three sisters sat down at the big wooden table in the kitchen to peel hard-boiled eggs and talk.

"I believe I have solved Sam's problem with his marriage," said Cina with a sly smile.

"I have as well," Suna said warily.

"As did I," Juna admitted.

As they confessed their spells, it became clear that Sam was in want of a new opportunity.

"We need an egg lass," Suna said.

"An egg lass?" asked Cina.

"Yes, a practical one, to help with the spring work," answered Suna.

"Would that also be the one with clever hands?" asked Juna.

"Uh-huh," said Suna, reaching for another egg.

"And a cheerful disposition?" Cina put in, catching on.

"Mmm," agreed Suna, "and easy on the eyes."

"And a wonderful cook, kind hearted and well-mannered," Cina tossed in for good measure.

"I'm on it," Juna declared, judging herself to be a great discerner of people, and off she went to town on her bicycle to find a suitable candidate.

Sam came in for lunch of egg salad sandwiches and deviled eggs. He showed Cina and Suna his plans to replace the braces on the plow and repair the harness. If he noticed the lack of visitors, he didn't mention it.

That night before dinner, Juna arrived home to announce that Lucy the egg lass would be staying in the loft for a time to help out with worming the chickens and spring cleaning the coops. Lucy turned out to be a sensible girl, fair as a summer's day and inclined to pay Sam only the courtesy required to one's employer's relative. Consequently Sam's eyes followed the girl whenever they passed and he tried rather unsuccessfully to find reasons to go out to the hen house.

Days passed and the weather began to warm. Sam finished fixing the plow, hitched it to the old horse, and turned the soil in the fields. He first planted corn and then beans in long rows at night during the new moon. One morning he and Cina were changing out beans for pumpkin seeds in the plow hopper when Cina glanced up and saw Juna and Suna watching her from the house. They exchanged nods.

"Oh no!" Cina exclaimed dramatically. Sam and the horse both looked up, startled.

"The chickens have gotten out!" she declared, pointing at the hen house where sure enough, chickens erupted through a hole in the fence with the force of a burst pipe. Poor Lucy was running around variously trying to catch them and block the hole.

Sam was off like a shot before Cina could get out another word. She dusted off her hands and walked to the house where she slipped inside with her sisters and sat down for a glass of cold tea.

"No spells now, we all agreed," Suna reminded them.

"Won't need any," Juna assured her.

And indeed within a week, Sam and Lucy were gone back to Skywater together. Things were quiet for a few days until one afternoon Cina ran into the house calling to her sisters.

"Come and see!" she cried.

Juna and Suna came to the front porch and saw out on the road a determined-looking group of young men heading their way, the one in front carrying a small black goat.