



THE ENCHANTED STAG

Far far away, over many tall mountains and beyond many vast fields, there once lived a forester with his wife and two beautiful children – his daughter Annie and her younger brother Dandy. They all lived happily together until one day a terrible tragedy befell them. The mother fell very sick and no healer was able to help her. After she passed away, a cloud of sadness crept over their house and the poor forester had to take care of his children alone.

After some time, he decided they shouldn't grow up without a mother. He found a new wife and after they got married, she and her own daughter moved in with the family. But the new stepmother was nothing like their mum. Although she pretended to be nice and kind at first, as soon as she moved in, she turned into a cruel shrew, a proper evil witch. The apple hadn't fallen far from the tree and her daughter was just as mean and brimming with hatred. Before long, the forester wasn't good enough for his new wife anymore and one day, she decided to get rid of him. She brewed a strong potion of hemlock and poisoned her new husband.

Annie and Dandy suddenly became poor orphans. The stepmother and her lazy daughter bullied and tormented them from dawn till dusk. They beat them, forced them to do all the chores and only fed them leftovers no one wanted

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to eat anymore. Every night, the stepmother locked them up in a dirty cowshed where they had to sleep.

The poor children lived this nightmare every day for what felt like a lifetime until one night when they decided to escape. After all, things couldn't get any worse for them anyway, and sooner or later their stepmother would surely torture them to death. And so they both pushed against the old wooden door until it finally burst open. They packed a little bit of water and two half-rotten apples the stepmother had thrown at them the night before, and then quickly ran into the dark forest. They needed to get as far as possible before the stepmother woke up in the morning, so they ran without a break for as long as they could while their hair was standing on end from the terrifying noises coming from the forest.

The next morning as the sun was coming up and the rooster was announcing the start of the day, they were already far away. The stepmother, however, was just waking up and immediately headed to the shed to put the kids to work.

"Wake up you good-for-nothings, we need breakfast and the yard won't clean itself either!" she yelled on her way to the shed. When she saw the door was broken and the shed empty, she almost burst with anger. She ran back home to get her magic wand and chanted: "I curse those little rascals! May their thirst transform them into a woodland creature!"

Annie and Dandy continued relentlessly through the woods, but they were getting more and more thirsty. It had already been a long time since they'd run out of the little water they had. Suddenly they noticed a small puddle – a deep wolf track filled with water.

They were almost dipping their lips in the water when suddenly the face of their beloved mother appeared on the surface and they heard her say: "Don't drink this water! If you do, you'll turn into wolves."

The kids were very thirsty, but they listened to their guardian angel. They split one of the apples between them to quench their thirst if only for a moment. Then they continued walking. The trees offered some shade along the forest path, but the sun was still beating down on them. Soon they stumbled upon another puddle, bigger than the first one. It was a bear track. They rejoiced and quickly

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kneeled down beside the puddle because their heads were already spinning from thirst.

But once again, their mother appeared in the water and warned them: “Don’t drink this water! If you do, you’ll turn into bears!”

The children listened to her and split the second apple instead. After a short rest, they continued on their way. They walked and walked, not knowing where, hoping to find a spring. But they didn’t go far before Annie stopped, completely drained of all her strength, and sat down on the soft carpet of moss.

“Dandy, my little brother, let’s have some rest. I can’t walk any further. Let me just take a little nap in the shade,” she said and as soon as she finished, her eyes shut and she fell asleep.

Dandy couldn’t keep going either. He went to sit down next to Annie, but then he noticed a tiny track with a little bit of water. At that point, he was so thirsty he would drink anything. He bent down to drink when he heard his mother’s voice again: “Don’t drink this water! If you do, you’ll turn into a deer.” Dandy hesitated for a moment, but he was too thirsty to resist. They didn’t even have any more apples! If he was going to turn into a deer, so be it, thought Dandy, it was better than dying from thirst. As soon as he took the first gulp, he turned into a defenceless buck.

When Annie woke up from her nap, her brother was nowhere to be found. She looked around and soon noticed a small stag watching her with his big, sad eyes. Annie burst into tears because she realised what a terrible tragedy must have happened while she was sleeping. The deer came to her and nestled against her as if trying to comfort her. She stroked him softly and said: “Don’t worry, little brother, I’ll take care of you. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Annie went on and the stag followed her with his head bent down. Before long, they reached a spring with crystal-clear water that they had longed for so much. The sun was almost setting down when they found an abandoned shack. Its door was wide-open. Annie slowly went inside. She saw that no one had lived there for a while, so they decided to stay there for some time. After all, they didn’t have anywhere else to go. And when Annie tidied the place up a bit, it was actually

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quite cosy.

Time was quickly passing by and Annie and her brother, cursed into a stag, grew up living alone surrounded by trees. The forest provided everything they needed. They ate the fruits and berries they found there and drank water from a nearby spring.

One sunny day, the sound of hunters blowing their horns echoed through the forest. The nobility from a nearby kingdom was celebrating and decided to go hunting. When Annie heard their horns and the barking of their hounds, her heart sank. Her brother just went outside to take a stroll in the woods. As soon as she heard the first gunshot, she ran out of the shack to help her poor brother. Luckily, her terrified brother had just rushed out of the bushes and didn't stop until he was safely inside. She was relieved when she saw Dandy was safe and sound. She hugged him tightly and tried to calm him down.

Suddenly someone banged at the door. They both became terribly frightened because up until then no living soul had even known they lived there. At least they thought no one did. Annie opened the door to find the prince himself standing outside. It was him who had tried to shoot the buck and when he escaped, he followed him all the way to their shack. Annie bowed before the prince and greeted him politely. The prince couldn't take his eyes off her. He lost his voice when he saw how beautiful she was. No girl at the royal court was as beautiful as her, which says a lot, since the court was full of lovely young maidens.

The prince forgot all about the hunt and started talking with her. Annie told him everything about the stepmother and her cursed brother. The prince listened carefully to her story and when she finished, he asked her to come with him to the palace – and she could of course take her deer-brother with her. The prince promised he would see to it that no harm would come to him. And if Annie agreed, he would be happy to marry her, because he fell madly in love with her as soon as he laid his eyes upon her.

That very day, Annie and Dandy set out to the royal palace. Before long, Annie and the prince got married and she became a wonderful queen. Her bewitched brother was also well taken care of. Everyone lived happily, the people loved their

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new king and queen, and one day, rumours started spreading of a royal stork bringing a baby prince to the ruling couple.

Indeed, a few months later, the entire kingdom was celebrating the birth of their son Matthew. For the king and queen, it was the happiest day of their lives. But since they still had a lot of responsibilities at the court, they decided to hire nannies to help them tend to the baby.

By that time, the stepmother and her useless daughter had still been living in the old lodge. When they heard who had become their new queen, they were fuming with anger. So when they got the news about the baby and that the palace was looking to hire nannies, they saw an opportunity to get back at Annie.

The next day, the two hags headed to the palace to try their luck in becoming the royal nannies. They disguised themselves so thoroughly that no one could recognise them.

They acted kindly and respectfully before the king, promising they would provide the royal son with the best care anyone could imagine. Unfortunately, soothed by their smiles and sweet words, the king fell for the bait, and out of all the nannies, he picked the stepmother and her daughter.

After some time, the king had to leave for a few days and thus left his beloved wife and her child in the care of the nannies. They assured him he didn't need to worry. They would surely manage without him for a few days and tend lovingly to any of the queen's and prince's needs.

But as soon as the king left the palace gates, they rushed into the queen's chambers. Annie turned as white as a sheet when she saw the two evil women at her door. They dragged her out of her bed, locked her in the deepest dungeon and left her there without a bite to eat or a drop of water to drink.

Then they hurried back into her chambers where the stepsister lay in the bed in Annie's place. Matthew knew something was wrong when he couldn't see his mum next to him. He started screaming his head off, but no one came to help him. His crying sounded all the way to the yard where Dandy heard it, so he galloped over to his sister's room. When he saw Annie wasn't there and noticed the evil stepmother, he knew they were in trouble.

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After a few days, the king returned from his journey and ran to see Annie and Matthew.

He stood by the queen's bed, wondering why his wife was hiding her face under a veil.

"The queen is unwell, she needs to rest," said the stepmother and dragged the king outside.

But before she threw him out, the buck forced his way inside and with one long leap, he was standing by the bed. He snatched the veil off his stepsister's face with his antlers. When the king saw it wasn't his beautiful Annie but one of the nannies he had hired, he called for the guards to seize them. However before the guards could come, the two hags jumped out of a window into the river below. But the river was wild, and soon both the stepmother and her daughter sank beneath the surface of the water. And just like that, the stepmother's curse was broken, and where a stag had been standing just a moment ago, now stood a handsome young man. The king took Matthew in his arms and together with Dandy they went looking for Annie. It didn't take them long to find Annie in the dungeon, where was fine and well even after so many days in the prison.

Everyone in the palace lived happily ever after and they loved each other very much. Dandy took a liking to a kind and beautiful girl at the royal court and people soon started whispering rumours about another wedding at the palace.