

An Eye for an Eye

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Men, women, and children, adorned in bright flowers, all danced around the maypole, intertwining the ribbons of love and life to grant fertility. Later in the year they would sacrifice the heads of their livestock, and in return, I would bestow them with the most beautiful gift of them all: fertility. The ability to bring life into the world, whether it be their harvest or a child of their own.

Even further up North, people were so devout as to offer the heads off their own bodies, so that vegetation would soon sprout from the severed corpse to feed their village.

All of this was at the expense of the Witch's dream: to birth a child of her own. Granting fertility to the land drained her of the power to grow a life inside herself.

And yet every year, as severed cow heads lined the path to her tower as offerings for her labour, she snuck under the rising moon, past the village dogs and farmers working late into the night, and poured nourishment into the plants. Late in the night, as the burning amber moon sunk below the horizon, she blessed women's wombs with fertility.

In return she felt her loneliness grow deeper. She felt it in the way dust collected in her tower and how spiders spun their webs in the crib she had made long ago.

But even giving up livestock became too tedious for the people, and soon the tradition transcending centuries waned like the sinking moon.

Now, everywhere the Witch went, she could hear the dying breaths of the browning wheat and pathetic potatoes. Over in the next village, the schools of children would dwindle, and women found it harder to conceive. Dark clouds constantly loomed over the kingdom; however, they held an empty promise of rain that would never fall. The Witch had the ability to ease the troubles of the people, but for the first time in her life she was free from the burdens of providing for the ungrateful people who used her. As someone who always had to lurk in the shadows, she could now walk in the sun.

Because if the people were not willing to give up something, why should she?

Quietly, over the garden wall, "Shhhhhh."

One by one, the men filed into the Witch's tower. In one corner sat a pot quietly bubbling over a fire, bundles of herbs adorning the stone walls. The smoke and herbs emitted a warm haze around the room that was interrupted by the men. The fire glinted off their chainmail and cast sparkles in the cramped room. In the opposite end lay a cradle birthed from an old, hollowed tree trunk, soft blankets creating an empty bed.

The Witch lay in a bed in the corner, purple silks draping around her. Her dark unseemly hair enveloped her like she was being washed away into a black sea; only her pale face peaked through. Her lips were slightly parted to let out a gentle snore every now and then. She was peacefully asleep.

On the command of a large man who had led the small chivalry inside, they gathered around the bed. Whilst one held a rag above the Witch's face, others were positioned to pull back the covers and restrain her limbs. Finally, a man with nervous eyes behind round spectacles held a knife to the Witch's abdomen. "Shall I begin?"

The blade sliced across her abdomen. In an instant the Witch let out a chilling shriek that rang out across the surrounding woods. She writhed in pain like a newt being boiled alive, but the men held her down. Her eyes scoured the faces that loomed over her until she landed on the King. He stood behind the men, looking down on the mutilation with an infuriating smugness in his eyes. The Witch could feel herself slipping into unconsciousness as she felt the blade slicing through her organs.

The King's twisted mouth opened to spit out a few words over the working men's shoulders. "If you shall curse our crops to die and our children to go on unborn, then it is only fair to take revenge upon your body, you Witch."

Awoken by a searing pain which seized her whole body, the Witch could feel something of her was missing. Uncovering her stomach, a wretched raw scar curled under her shrivelled abdomen. She let out a heart wrenching sob that was cut short as the pain became unbearable. The King had ordered for her child rearing organs to be removed, even after all she had done for his people and the people who had come before him.

What a cruel joke.

She had done it many times before: skirted around the castle walls in the pale moonlight. But this time she wasn't leaving her gifts behind, she was taking something instead. Above her, billowing curtains in the window signalled it was the King and Queen's bedroom. She scaled the wall until she was perched on the sill, peering in.

There, the King lay, his gnarled mouth open to choke on a hideous snore. How blissfully unaware was he; unshackled by the guilt of the pain he had caused her. The Witch noticed the empty space beside him.

In the far corner of the room was a silken screen, lit up by candlelight, illuminating the figure of a woman holding a baby to her breast. The Witch crept along the carpet until she could peer behind the screen. But as she came into view, the Queen didn't flinch.

In contrast to the King, she was a simple and delicate beauty, with large hazel eyes and golden hair lit up by the firelight. In her arms was a baby with puckered lips and long white eyelashes, just like her mother. She was the incarnation of what the King had stolen from her.

"She's just settled down," said the Queen softly. "She gets anxious in the night."

In an instant, all the rage the Witch had previously felt had simmered down, leaving behind a grief that sat in the pit of her stomach like a lump of coal. She felt herself melting into the peaceful expression of the baby. "She's precious," the Witch whispered, unable to hide the longing in her voice.

The Queen rose from her chair and stood close to the Witch, closer than anyone had stood to her in centuries, and slid the baby into her arms. She guided the Witch's hands to support the baby's head, and slowly rocked her arms back and forth, just the way the baby liked.

Then she looked into the Witch's eyes with a new conviction. "The King has taken something from you," she whispered, "something sacred and beautiful. Something that is solely yours to own. All he does is take, and this Kingdom has wronged you after all you have done for us. I can't make it better, but will you accept what is most precious to me? Will you forgive us?"

Once more the Witch looked down at the sleeping baby and let the calm wash over her. She knew the Queen was making the hardest decision in her life, to offer her baby to the Witch.

This was the final time that the Witch would accept an offering, but this time it was with warmth and love.

The Witch caressed the baby's golden hair that had already begun to grow in wisps. It shimmered like the wheat fields she had blessed for centuries for the Kingdom; order would soon be restored.

Instead she held the baby up to the sunlight which reached through the leaves above, and with her enchantments she sang:

*Power of the Sun and Moon
Chase away the drought
Flower, spring and sprout
Thrive under the light
Flower, let love ignite.*

At once the hair on the girl's head began to grow longer and longer, until it trailed all around the Witch. "I will never let you go," she whispered. The baby opened her brilliant cabbage green eyes and giggled joyously.

The Witch decided on a name. "I think I shall call you Rapunzel."