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The Strange Witch of Willowweed

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The strange Witch of Willowweed lived in a pink house on top of a hill. The walls were made of willowweed flower. Nobody knew how long the witch had lived there. The witch was friendly, but she never let anyone come all the way up to her house. She cast her spells at the foot of the hill. The people who wanted to ask her for advice found exactly the advice they needed in the spells. "Why would I make all the people come all the way to the top of the hill when I can do it like this?" said the strange witch in a friendly voice.

But one day Princess Winsome reached the pink house of the strange witch. She wanted to ask the witch how to find the bravest boy in the world. The witch asked if there was no brave boy in her own land, but the princess thought there was not. The Witch of Willowweed said, "The only way to find him is by letting him find you. And the best I can do for you is to lock you up in an enchanted forest, where only the bravest boy in the world will come looking for you."

The princess disappeared and a minute later the strange witch had another visitor. This time it was a strong, cheerful-looking boy who called himself Kit the Coward. "You must have run away from home," said the witch, "because they called you a coward? And now you want to show them that you are as brave as they are, but you don't fight without a reason. Is that it?"

"Yes," answered Kit. "But how can I find something worth fighting for?"

"Go to King Hurlyburly," said the witch, "and ask him to let you do something brave. The king is always going to fight a war somewhere, so you'll soon fight as much as you want."

"Okay," said the boy, "how do I find the way to that King Hurlyburly?"

"You'll find it yourself," answered the witch. And the birds flew ahead of him, showing him the way to King Hurlyburly's palace. There he told the king that he had come to fight for him. The king was so happy that someone so strong and kind wanted to fight for him that he immediately gave him a job as commander-in-chief. Now the great army he had ready had something to do at last.

"Then you invade the land of my neighbor, King Topsyturvy," said the king.



"Why do I have to invade King Topsyturvy's land?" asked Kit. The king had forgotten, but he thought the reason was of no importance. But Kit said he could not possibly fight without a reason.

"Isn't it enough if you make up a reason?" he asked Kit, "You can marry Princess Winsome if you win the war," he added afterwards.

But Kit just shook his head. He had never heard of Princess Winsome, and he would not fight anyone without a very good reason.

Then King Hurlyburly had an idea. "First of all, declare war on the enemy," he said. "Maybe they'll remember the reason."

And that's what Kit did right away. He arrived at King Topsyturvy's court the next morning, just as he was starting his breakfast.

"I've come here to declare war on behalf of King Hurlyburly," said Kit, who always got straight to the point.

"Why?" asked King Topsyturvy.

"I actually wanted to hear that from you, because I don't know," said Kit.

The king ate two eggs before he answered.

"I think," he said, "it's because I called him an old, absent-minded man. I think that's why. All right! When do you want to start?"

"I don't want to start at all," said Kit. "Why did you call him an old, absent-minded man?"

"Oh, just to make conversation," said King Topsyturvy.

"So you don't really think he's an old, absent-minded man?" asked Kit.

"Oh no," said the king, "I never think."

"Then write that on a piece of paper, and there doesn't have to be a war at all!" cried Kit.

It turned out that King Topsyturvy couldn't write, so Kit wrote the note and had the king sign it. Then he hurried back to the land of King Hurlyburly.

"Well," said King Hurlyburly, "did you find out the reason?"

"There was no reason, and there will be no war," answered Kit. And he held out to him the beautifully written apology from King Topsyturvy.

"What!" cried the king, alarmed. "Do you mean you stopped the war?"

"Of course I did," said Kit. "And in a way, I've won the war too, as you see. Didn't you say something about a princess?"

"But," stammered King Hurlyburly, "how can I appease the army? The army is set on war."

"So am I," replied Kit, sadly. "But I can never find anything worth fighting for. Where is the princess?"

"The princess has run away from home," said the king. "She's locked up in an enchanted forest, surrounded by wild beasts and giants. It's not a nice place for a princess, but how do I get her out of there?"

"Well," cried Kit, "isn't this something for your army to do?"

"I've asked them, but they're too afraid of being enchanted," said the king, sadly.

"Hooray," cried Kit, laughing. "At last I've found something brave to do. I'll go and rescue the princess."

The birds showed Kit the way again to reach his destination: the enchanted forest. But they did not fly further with him, because no one can help someone go through an enchanted forest. Kit soon knew that he had to search for the princess alone, and he was not afraid. He had learned to speak the language of the forest all the time that other boys were fighting with each other (for nothing). He quickly became friends with every animal in the forest, and they told him the best places to find apples, nuts, and blackberries. He became so happy and content that he completely forgot that he was enchanted and could not escape if he wanted to.

But at some point, he came to a part of the forest where it was very dark and strangely quiet. It gave Kit a feeling of emptiness and sadness. He wanted to break the silence by clapping his hands, but it remained quiet. No matter what he did, there was no sound. Then Kit remembered a tune he could whistle that he had learned long ago from the birds, which always helped him on his journey

to reach his destination. And this time he was looking for the princess. So he whistled, and at first nothing happened, until after a while a fat blackbird sat on his shoulder. The bird hopped ahead of him, and so Kit found himself in a part of the forest where the sun was shining. He approached a high stone wall. Behind the wall, he could see tall towers of a large castle, but he was soon distracted by a girl sitting on the wall. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

"What are you doing here?" was the first thing the girl said.

Kit replied, "I'm here to save the princess. Can you tell me where she is?"

"She lives in the castle over there," the girl answered. "What will you do once you've saved her?"

"Well, I think I'll ask her to marry me," Kit said. "Do you think she'll say yes?"

"Oh," she replied seriously. "First, tell me who you are."

"I am Kit the Coward," he said.

Then the girl started laughing loudly. "What nonsense," she said. "If you were a coward, you would never have come here."

"Is that true?" Kit asked. "Do you think the princess will marry me then?"

"I think the princess might," she said softly. "If you help me down from this enormous high wall, we can go ask her."

After he lifted her off the wall, she began rummaging through the dry leaves.

"What are you doing?" Kit asked.

"I'm looking for my crown, of course," she said. "It fell off my head just before you came, and I was too scared to jump off the wall."

"Here it is," Kit said, picking up the glittering crown and placing it carefully on her beautiful hair. Then he understood: "You're the princess!"

"Of course I am," the princess laughed, taking his hand. "Shall we go home now?"

They set out for home, but since they were walking in an enchanted forest, the way back wasn't so easy to find. Along the way, they met a giant. The princess was startled by his enormous stature and cowered behind Kit's back.

"What is this? Do you want to leave the forest with the princess?" bellowed the giant.

"That's the plan," Kit replied, "And if you want to stop me, I'll have to kill you."

"Well, bring it on then," said the giant, "because I can't just let you go."

Kit was happy, for he finally had a reason to fight and no one could call him a coward anymore. So there they stood with fists clenched, until suddenly the giant ran away. All the animals of the forest had gathered behind Kit to help him. There were wolves, bears, lions, and tigers among them. The giant probably saw the writing on the wall and feared that he couldn't win a fight against the animals.

"Isn't it amazing?" whispered the little princess.

But Kit covered his disappointed face with his hands. "The other boys will never believe I'm not a coward."

"I think you're the bravest boy in the world," she said.

"Of course he is," chuckled a voice nearby. It was the strange Witch of the Willowweed. She was hiding under a tree. When they looked into her beautiful witch's eyes, they knew that it didn't matter what others thought of them.

"Dear princess," Kit said, "it doesn't matter if the other boys believe me or not, as long as you know that I'm not a coward."

"Moreover," Princess Winsome added, "we won't try to make anyone believe anything. It's useless, as long as you believe in yourself."

"And so it is," laughed the witch.

And then the wedding was immediately performed, as all the guests had gathered behind the princess and Kit. A long table was set with delicious treats made from all the good things that can be found in the forest.

The Strange Witch of the Willow Herb returned to her pink cottage on top of the hill after the party, to prepare for the next person who would climb the hill for her advice.

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