
WITCHES — IN DEED

Val Thame



Chapter One

Its nose is too small,” declared Aunt Drab, poking her own long and pointed nose into the new baby’s cot. “And . . . ugh! It’s smiling at me !”

“Let me see! Let me see!” Aunt Stormkettle pushed her elderly sister aside. She too peered into the cot, her black, stringy hair dangling down like a bead curtain. “Oh, how disappointing!” she said when she saw the baby’s sweet face. “It doesn’t look like any of us!”

“Doesn’t look like anybody!” said Aunt Thunder. “It’s almost pretty and it looks disgustingly pleasant.”

“And it hasn’t got a single spot!” said Drab, who was extremely proud of her own green and warty features. “That child’s too ordinary to be our niece. It’s a usurper!”

“Oh, come now dear!” said Aunt Nettle, possibly the kindest of the Aunts, as she put

an arm around her sister. “Of course it isn’t a usurper. They come from the Himalayas, don’t they, or somewhere like that?”

“No, they don’t! And I didn’t mean that!”

“Oh, well! I was never good at geography. But such a clever word, Drab. What does it mean?”

“It means that baby doesn’t belong here. That’s what it means!”

“Oh, how can you say that about our dear Hayzell’s baby? She may be our great, great, great, great and ever-so-many greats, great niece but make no mistake, that child is ours! As for the smile, well, it’s very young. I expect it was a touch of wind. That happens with babies. I don’t think they can help it.”

“Rotting cabbage!” said Thunder. “Witch babies don’t do it! I know a real smile when I see one, and I hate smiles! That child looks to me as though it’s going to grow up to be a goody-goody!”

“Oh no!” The gaggle of ancient crones once more dipped their horrible heads into the small, black cot. “No, you don’t mean that, sister. It can’t be *good*.”

Aunt Stormkettle poked the small bundle with a bony finger. “I’d like it to be a bad, ugly baby and think horribly evil thoughts. Say gungey-gungey, baby! Pokey-eyes-out. Sicky-sicky.”

The baby cooed happily and burped; a quiet, delicate burp like a musical hiccup. Then it smiled prettily, turned over and fell asleep sucking its thumb. Stormkettle recoiled in horror.

“Festering frogs! Look at it! I’ve never seen such a contented child.”

“You silly old hags,” cried Thunder, elbowing her way through her flapping, fussing sisters. “If you’d stop dribbling over that gruesome baby and stand back, you might see something important. But I don’t suppose any of you have the eye for it.”

The Aunts began to bicker.

“Speak for yourself! *I* saw it!”

“Oh, listen to her. So did I!”

“What was it then?”

“Not telling!”

“You didn’t see it!”

“Yes I did!”

“Didn’t!”

“Did! Did! Did!” The Aunts’ shrill voices got louder and louder.

“Beee-KWY-ERT!” Thunder was well named. She was a large witch with a voice so terrible that sometimes it made the sky shudder and the clouds mass together in a dark huddle. At such times the clouds were so frightened they cried, and drenched the earth in their tears.

The quarrelsome sisters took notice of Thunder – not because she was older or wiser, but because she was a lot bigger and had a vile temper. When she had their attention Thunder said, “Our new niece is very plain, well we can all see that, not one single pimple! Sister Drab put it very well when she said the child is ordinary. So ordinary, I would say, it could almost be a mortal.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” There was a long and eerie intake of breath from the horrified Aunts. It sounded like all four winds blowing through all the forests in the world. It was a noise which sent shivers down the spines of all who heard it. Likening a witchling to a mortal was a terrible thing to say.

Chapter Two

The awful sound of the horrified Aunts reached the ears of the baby's mother, Witch Hayzell. She had been in the kitchen preparing supper for her great and ancient Aunts who had gathered together for the Witchling Naming Ceremony. It is a peculiar tradition among witches that Aunts, and only Aunts, name the children. Boy or girl it does not matter, nor do the opinions of the parents on these occasions. Sensing trouble, which is easy for a witch, Hayzell pushed her way through the Aunts still crowding round the cot.

“What’s the matter?” She picked up her small daughter. “What have the Aunties been doing to you? Is baby alright?”

“Put that child down!” said Stormkettle. “It makes my bunions burn to see you cooing and cuddling it! It’ll only make it good-tempered. ‘Bout time it learnt a few

nasties. Six months old and what does it do? Why, my little Stormina Teacup could zap up her favourite toy at that age, and make it fetch and carry for her. I remember when my Stormina . . .”

Hayzell interrupted quickly because once Aunt Stormkettle settled into a story about her Stormina there was no stopping her. “But this little one is not yours, Aunt — she’s mine! And I can assure you, there’s nothing wrong with her at all!” Hayzell laid the baby down on its black, frilly pillow where it immediately went to sleep.

“Look at that!” said Drab. “Not a whimper. I don’t understand it. Why isn’t it crying?”

Hayzell had no answer to this, so she said, “Supper’s ready.” Then she added, “The naming ceremony can begin.”

This was the moment the Aunts had been waiting for. They made a rush for the cot, elbowing and pushing each other out of the way, to get closer to the baby.

It was surprising to think the Aunts had so much energy for they were extremely old. Some were so ancient their birthdays were counted in hundreds instead of years. Some were still in their prime, but others were frail and dodderly. Hayzell loved every one of them, especially Aunt Nettle. She was so old she had long forgotten when she was born, and a few other things besides — including

most of her spells. She was becoming unreliable and would soon have to retire.

The Aunts' clothes had to be seen to be believed. Each wore an assortment of dark and dirty rags, handed down through centuries of fashion. The messier they looked, the happier they were. It was the way of Aunts, especially old and witchy ones. Aunt Thunder was the only one who kept the same garment on top all the time. It was a waterproof raincoat which was several sizes too big, making her look even fatter than she already was. But Thunder liked its shininess because she could see everything in it! She could see herself, and anybody who might be sneaking up behind her!

Hayzell was the only witch in the room who was not completely ugly. She did have a long nose but it was an elegant nose. She also had startling green eyes but they were attractive, almond-shaped eyes. She had unusual red hair that glowed in the dark and she did not wear the customary black, but all the colours of the rainbow which, although accepted by the regular witches, was nonetheless considered rather eccentric.

Hayzell's eccentricity had recently been the subject of much gossip among her Aunts. Hadn't she gone off two years ago

and got married without inviting them to the wedding? And who was this Marvo the Magnificent she had married? Had anybody met him? No! Then back she comes one night with her new baby, but no sign of Marvo. The Aunts questioned her closely but learnt nothing.

“Sit down! For crow’s sake!” roared Thunder, trying to bring about some order. Worn out with struggling, the Aunts collapsed onto the floor into a semicircle of old, black rags. Hayzell stood next to the cot and the first part of the ceremony began. Names were tossed to and fro. Into the circle and out again. Each Aunt had a chosen name.

“Slime! Spiderlegs! Acid-drop! Sludgebucket! Muddikins!”

Each was considered carefully.

“Too green. Too thin. Too sharp. Too muddy. Too silly!”

Then it was Aunt Thunder’s turn. “That child doesn’t deserve one of our names. Naturally, I’d like it to be named after me but I tell you, sisters, that infant hasn’t got what it takes. I suggest we call it something really wet, like Raindrop, or Shower or, better still — Drizzle.”

The Aunts seemed to like this name. A thin buzz of excitement ran round the circle.

“Hmnn, Drizzle? Hmnnnn, sounds alright. Sounds wet enough!”

Aunt Thunder smirked under the large collar of her mirror-like raincoat. “Then, if we all agree, I say we get on with the supper.”

“Wait a bit,” cried Hayzell, who did not really want her first-born daughter to be called Drizzle. “Aunt Nettle hasn’t said anything yet.”

“Well dear, I hadn’t really thought of anything.”

“Typical!” said Stormkettle. “You shouldn’t have come if you didn’t have a name.”

“I should so!”

“No, you shouldn’t!”

“Yes, I should!”

“Shouldn’t!”

“Should! Should! Hundred times should! So there!”

“OK! OK!” said Hayzell, losing just a little patience with her Aunts. “If you haven’t got a name, then it’ll have to be . . .”

“But I have got a name!” said Nettle. “Which of us said the witchling looked like a goody?”

“Me!” said Drab. “Terrible crying shame!”

“No, it isn’t!” said Nettle.

“’Tis!” said Drab, “I just said so!”

“No, it isn’t!”

“’TIS!”

“Oh, get on with it, you miserable old crones,” bellowed Aunt Thunder. “I want my supper!”

“I’m sorry, sister,” said Nettle, “but if it is a goody, and wickedness knows we hope she won’t be, then why not call her Goodrun?”

Stormkettle said she had never heard of such a sick-making name. Drab said it was yukky and Thunder said it would put her off her supper. The witches began to argue again. Hayzell waited patiently and, after a while, they came out of their huddle and Drab, who was spokeswitch, said, “We name this child as Nettle named her — Goodrun!”

Then they slapped and hugged and shook poor old Nettle till she was dizzy. Even Aunt Thunder said the name was probably more suitable. Hayzell smiled fondly at her daughter and as she bent down to kiss the baby’s soft, downy cheek she whispered, “It’s a pity your father can’t be here but . . . here’s a present from him.” And underneath the pillow Hayzell tucked a small brown envelope. “One day perhaps, when you are older, and able to understand, I’ll tell you all about him.”

And while the Aunts nosily gobbled up their Batswing soup and Frogsleg fritters, baby Goodrun slept, blissfully unaware that she was very special and quite different from everyone else.