

Berta and the Chestnut Seller of the Sleeping Forest

Two days before Castanyada, the village of Fontfreda smelled of firewood, cinnamon, and sweet potatoes. In the town square, the residents hung garlands of dried leaves and set up long tables. Everyone had work to do, including Berta, who had promised to bring a basket of chestnuts from her grandfather’s tree.

That morning, however, the forest was strangely still. No birds sang, the branches didn’t creak, and not even the wind played with the leaves. Berta walked along the path until she heard a very faint tinkling sound: tinkling, tinkling… Among the oak trees, she found a chestnut seller with a checkered headscarf, sitting next to an unlit fire.

“My name is Maria,” the woman said. “Every autumn I ring this little bell and the forest awakens to celebrate the Chestnut Festival. However, today its sound doesn’t reach anywhere.”

Berta looked at the ground. A huge carpet of leaves covered the path and muffled every sound. She tried to push them aside with her feet, but there were so many they seemed endless.

“I can’t do it alone,” she said.

A squirrel poked its head out from a tree trunk. Then a rabbit appeared, followed by a robin, and finally, a small roe deer. Berta explained what was happening. The squirrel brought dry twigs, the rabbit cleared paths through the leaves, the robin alerted the animals farther away, and the roe deer dragged a basket full of chestnuts.

Berta and Maria lit the fire. When the first chestnut cracked—pop-pop!—everyone laughed. The chestnut seller rang the little bell again. This time the tinkling sound traveled along the newly cleared paths, climbed the tree trunks, and reached the treetops.

The forest awoke suddenly. The branches resumed their dance, the birds sang, and a swirl of golden leaves twirled around Berta.

“The bell hadn’t lost its voice,” the girl understood. “It just needed us to clear the way.”

Maria filled two baskets. One was for the village festival; the other, for the animals that had helped. When Berta returned to the square, it was already dark, and everyone was waiting for her. She recounted the adventure while handing out warm chestnuts.

From that year on, before the Castanyada festival, the children of Fontfreda would go up to the forest to clear the paths and listen for the bell. And Berta always reserved the first chestnut for whoever had helped without expecting anything in return.