



Eiko Mutsuhana*

illust: vient

Hello,
I AM A WITCH
And my Crush
Wants me to Make a
LOVE POTION!

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Hello, I am a Witch and my Crush Wants me to Make a Love Potion!

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Hello, I am a Witch and my Crush Wants me to Make a Love Potion!

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Hello,
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Eiko Mutsuhana
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Royal Knight
Harij Azm

Good Witch of the Lake
Rose



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Prologue: The Witch and the Heartbreaking Love Potion

“**EXCUSE** me. Is this the dwelling of the Witch of the Lake?”

Startled by the unexpected visitor, the witch Rose froze with her hand on the opened door. She brushed pale-pink locks of hair off her cheek and tucked them behind her ear.

Standing in the doorway to Rose’s not-so-very-big (or rather, quite small) home-turned-workplace was a man hidden deep under a cloak so as to avoid being seen.

“Yes...indeed. This is the dwelling place of the *Good* Witch of the Lake.”

“I know this is sudden, but I’d like to make a request,” the man tersely said, informing her of his business in a pretentious tone accustomed to commanding others. The face she barely glimpsed under the hood was noticeably handsome even in the dim lamplight. Rose knew who he was even if he didn’t offer his name.

Harij Azm pulled the hood even lower over his beautiful face. It was only natural for visitors to conceal their identity upon coming to see the Witch. Coming to the Witch’s dwelling was a stain on one’s reputation, for no one wanted to be hexed by a fickle witch.

Swallowing hard, Rose watched Harij closely, wondering what absurd request brought the man who had no business here to her doorstep.

Harij spoke with a solemn air. “I want you to make a love potion.”

Too shocked for words, Rose reflexively brought the lettuce she was holding to her lips. She chewed on it like a rabbit might. The crispiness of the tender leaf satisfactorily crunched between her teeth.

“...Unfortunately, love potions are currently out of stock.”

“Then I assume you can make more?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

I might have botched that answer. Hidden just as well as Harij by her hooded robe, Rose realized too late that her evasive reply had failed to do its job, for Harij took her response to mean it could be done.

“In that case, I’ll place an order. I will collect any ingredients you require.”

“...It’s very expensive.”

“I’ll pay your asking price.”

“And it will take quite a long time to prepare...”

“I’ll wait. I’m sorry, but I hope you understand that you have no right to turn down my request.”

MUNCH. MUNCH. GULP.

Rose swallowed the rest of the lettuce.

Harij’s overbearing command was punctuated by a surprising lack of guilt.



.

THE loud *tong-tong-tong* of the cowbell announced a visitor.

“Welcome. Did you bring what I asked?”

Darkness had fallen behind Harij, who had set off the rattling cowbell above the door. The forest was creepy enough at night that even Rose, who had been born and raised there, feared it.

“Please come in. Let me take your things for you.”

Rose took the lantern Harij carried, then urged him to hand over his sword next, earning a fierce scowl from her guest. He likely didn’t want to be defenseless in the presence of a mysterious witch.

Nevertheless, Rose remained calm in the face of his pointed glare. As a witch, she always made a point of not letting her emotions show.

Harij grudgingly removed his overcoat, unbuckled the leather sword belt around his waist, and removed the scabbard.

Rose stole a glance at Harij’s face while accepting his things. She already knew of his beauty, but seeing his handsome face nearly drew a sigh of awe from her. Under his taut but elegantly slanted brows, almond-shaped eyes glinted. His ultramarine eyes glistened like the surface of the lake on a snowy day. The tips of his shapely ears were tinged pink from the cold night air. Ashen locks covered those ears as if to protect them.

His face, beautiful as a statue carved by the best sculptor in the kingdom, made her weak in the knees. Unfortunately, irritation was the only expression to grace his features thus far.

Rose hung his heavy sword and overcoat on the coatrack. She then placed his lit lantern on top of the fireplace.

Harij slipped inside the Witch’s abode and closed the door behind him. This was the seldom-visited Witch’s hermitage, where those who had no business never dropped by.

Deep inside the forest located on the outskirts of the royal capital, a hovel sat alone on a small island in the middle of a lake. The lake was like a giant puddle

surrounded by a large forest. In spring, colorful flowers bloomed. In summer, the surroundings were covered in greenery. In autumn, the trees turned a fiery red. And in winter, pure-white snow carpeted the lake.

The hovel was built in secret, in a place away from civilization, so beasts visited more frequently than people, and even they rarely ventured across the lake to see her.

Only a small boat connected the hermitage to the forest. The dinghy had been in use since her grandmother's time and was moored with a rope tied around the stake at the dock jutting out from the forest side. There wasn't anything as fancy as a boatman hanging around to take people out, so anyone who wished to make a request of the Witch had to row out to her themselves.

Only the tiny shack that teetered on the edge of being blown away and a simple garden maintainable by a single woman existed on the island in the middle of the lake.

Rose, the woman known as the Witch of the Lake, lived out there all alone.

She was a witch. Her mother was a witch; thus, she was born a witch.

She had lived alone with her grandmother since she lost her mother at an early age. Her grandmother passed away four years ago, leaving Rose completely alone. The hovel where they lived together was so cramped it didn't feel big even after it was just her.

The interior, illuminated by small lamps, was always dim, and the cauldron used to brew potions occupied most of the floor space. The walls were almost entirely stacked with storage cabinets. Books were messily crammed into the mismatched shelves, with herbs and powder satchels bursting from the gaps.

In addition to cleaning tools such as brooms and mops, strange staves that served unknown purposes and scrolls bent at the top were stuffed into the vases placed randomly around the room.

The floor was in an even worse state, for it was so littered with objects, visitors had to watch their step. Nothing was more eerie than the blackened carpet that looked ominously similar to old bloodstains.

Spices, herbs, furs, dried foods, and other essential items for making potions

hung from the ceiling, permeating the room with a heavy, astringent *smell*. Thus, the only space left for guests consisted of a small table and a simple wooden chair right by the entrance. Of course, the table had long since been transformed into another storage space with no tablecloth or place to put down a cup.

“Let me check what you brought.” Rose held out both hands.

Harij removed the leather bag from his belt, his condescending eyes never letting go of the Witch.

“You wanted the liver of a fire rat intoxicated from the ultrasonic waves of a muffler bat, right?”

Rose accepted the soiled bag without cringing. Cluttered with books and herbs, the table had no space left to lay out the contents. She forced the objects to the side with a hard push to make room for the ingredients.

Hard lines formed in Harij’s shadowed brow.

Once a suitable amount of space was made, Rose placed a lit lamp there. Orange light illuminated the table. She carefully unfurled the bag.

“Yes, this is what I require. It appears as though you paid extra care not to harm the liver during the skinning process. I haven’t seen the organs left in such impeccable shape in a long time.”

With a veiled expression, Rose closely examined the organ that might make a young lady of marriageable age faint to hear the process of its removal, then raised her impassive gaze to the client.

Harij nodded in an effort to remain calm.

“Now you can finally—”

“Yes, I can *finally* ask you for the next ingredient. Next I need...”

“You need *MORE?!?*”

Startled by the loud voice, Rose jumped about three fingers high into the air. Her loose robe puffed out like a blanket in the wind. Piles of dust kicked up off the floor.

“How many times have you sent me out already? Last time you wanted the pollen of a flower that only blooms on the edge of a certain precipitous cliffside. Before that, you asked for the first drop of rain. The time before that, it was the root of a plant that lets out a death cry. Each ingredient takes an immense amount of time to acquire, and yet you refuse to ask me for more than one at a time. Capital punishment would befall a royal pharmacist who did business like you!”

Until now, Harij had patiently collected the ingredients, but his patience had run out.

He took an angry step toward her. In response, Rose tugged the hood further over her face.

The already-petite witch looked even smaller when she shrunk down. Seeing her trembling inside her baggy robes must have struck Harij with guilt, for he quickly knelt before her.

“...Sorry for raising my voice.”

“Don’t be. It was dazzling...”

“Huh?”

“Your face is too handsome.”

Harij’s face—now up close—was too brilliant for Rose to gaze upon. She needed to squint. His face was so mesmerizing it looked like it was sparkling. Of course, she knew it was just the lamplight illuminating the floating dust particles that caused the effect.

“...What are you talking about?” His prior anger was nowhere to be seen as exasperation washed it away.

Oh, this expression of his is nice, too, Rose thought as she peered out from under her hood.

What type of people request love potions?

Perhaps they have no confidence in themselves. Maybe their love interest is unobtainable or someone who already has a partner. Whatever the circumstances, the one indisputable fact is that they have “someone they want

to make fall in love with them.”

Rose’s one-sided crush had suddenly paid a visit to her home. He came asking her to make him a love potion.

Not only did Harij not know about Rose’s feelings for him, but he obviously didn’t even know she existed. After all, their relationship was nothing more than her falling in love with the man at first sight during a visit to the city. The only thing that a recluse witch who wasn’t even on his radar until now could do was lengthen the time they had together before giving him the potion.

She didn’t dare dream of him reciprocating her feelings. All she wanted was to take up a small place in his memories.

A little slyness on her side was a fair trade. As a human, she deserved praise for not just dumping a love potion on his head the moment they met. It made her a failure of a witch, though.

“The next ingredient is the antenna of the rainbow long-horned grasshopper. Make sure you pluck it off on the night of a full moon.”

“...Wasn’t there just a full moon last week?”

“Indeed, there was.” Rose nodded as if he just told her the sky was blue.

Thanks to the full moon only appearing once a month, she just earned herself almost a whole month before he could obtain the next ingredient.

“I don’t have that much time...”

A blue line bulged from Harij’s temple. It was a thick vein. If she wasn’t careful, she might become captivated by its beauty.

Even the sheltered witch knew he didn’t have a lot of free time.

Harij Azm was a royal knight who worked in the magnificent palace that was visible even from the forest on the capital’s outskirts. He was an S-class elite knight. Through Rose’s research, she learned that his father was even a member of the aristocracy. Under normal circumstances, he was not the type of person to secretly frequent a hovel like hers. And that was precisely why Rose was so surprised by his first visit.

“I see... Well, not much we can do about your lack of time, is there? How

unfortunate.” Disappointment turned down her lips, making her expression match her words.

Harij exhaled an extra-pathetic sigh as if he’d picked up on her unsaid “This potion won’t be finished unless you prepare the ingredients, Mr. Client” and her stout refusal to arrange for the ingredients herself. His sigh spoke volumes about how much he wanted the love potion no matter the time, money, or effort it took to obtain.

“Oh, what a waste!” Rose cried out in a loud voice, rather than becoming depressed about how badly he wanted a love potion. “Please be sure to tell me the next time you are going to sigh. A beautiful man’s sighs are a prime ingredient in potion-making.”

“I’ll never tell you!”

An angry shout rang through the Witch’s abode. Emotion hidden from her face, Rose watched a displeased Harij storm from her dwelling.

Chapter 1: The Good Witch of the Lake **ROSE**

remembered the day she met Harij as if it were just yesterday.

It happened shortly after her grandmother passed away.

Still a fledgling witch at the time, Rose had failed at concocting a potion, which wasn't all that unusual for her. However, it was the first time she had to go into the big city alone to stock up on ingredients.

The royal capital was just beyond the forest where she lived. For all she knew, the forest may have been a part of the capital, but neither she nor the witches before her acknowledged it as such.

The city was brimming with smiles, activity, and noise unlike anything Rose had encountered in the woods.

The main road, lined with stones carved to be the same shape, was surprisingly easy to walk on. Houses made of brick and tile stood in neat rows along the thoroughfare. Tents were set up in front of the houses, selling grain-filled jute bags, colorful vegetables in baskets, and other useful ingredients.

Under one of the tents from which rabbits and foxes hung, a shopkeeper conversed with a customer while they smoked puffing pipes. A horse-drawn carriage raced through the narrow space in front of them at a tremendous speed. Children entertained themselves by chasing after the fast rotating wheels.

The city was full of life and excitement, but Rose wasn't in the right mindset to enjoy it. Anxiety filled her more than joy.

At the time, Rose had just taken over the house affairs and family business from her grandmother, and she was physically and mentally exhausted. She struggled to earn the trust of clients, and the chores she wasn't used to doing alone kept piling up.

With a heavy heart, she forced one foot in front of the other down the unfamiliar capital road.

Whenever she ventured into the city before, she was shown around by her grandmother, who taught her everything about being a witch. Rose was confident that she knew more about the forest than anyone else, but the cityscapes created by people all looked the same.

Everyone in the city looked too busy to ask for directions. Moreover, they were all dressed in colorful and fashionable clothing. It never bothered Rose when she was with her grandmother, but she felt a tad self-conscious wearing a hand-me-down dress from her mother around all these fancy city people. Feeling pathetic again, her steps grew heavier. Too shy to inquire, she searched for the store her grandmother usually frequented by herself. By chance, she overheard people talking along the way.

“Oh yeah, did you hear?! The Witch of the Lake is dead!”

Rose stopped in her tracks and turned toward the conversation, which was being held in a café. The aroma of something delicious like nothing she had ever smelled before lingered in the air. Red-faced customers sat at the outdoor tables, each holding a large mug and shouting their conversation.

“What? You sure?! That old hag has been around since I was a wee lad!”

“Don’t they say she’s been alive for over two hundred years? And here I thought she would live for another hundred.”

Obviously her grandmother hadn’t lived for two hundred years. They probably mistook her for her great-grandmother, or her great-great-grandmother. Rose stepped forward to correct them, but what they said next stayed her feet.

“Well, either way, it’s for the better!”

Shock drained the color from her face. Rose couldn’t believe her ears. Her heart throbbed and she felt sick to her stomach.

“Having a witch living nearby tarnishes the city’s reputation.”

“Who knows what might happen to you if you accidentally incur the wrath of a fickle and cruel witch!”

“I told my children to never go into the woods unless they want to be

devoured by the man-eating witch living there...”

“Now we have nothing to worry about.”

The customers laughed and sounded downright exuberant about the Witch’s demise.

Rose felt dizzy. Everything in front of her turned black and she started to forget how to stay standing.

Rose had no idea that the Witch was feared, that children were warned not to go into the woods, and that they so hated her kind that they would rejoice upon her grandmother’s death. To only realize this at her age told her just how sheltered from the world she was. Wondering if her grandmother knew of their malice horrified her.

If her grandmother had been aware, then she had always endured it alone and purposely shielded Rose from the truth. Perhaps Rose had been hiding from the grim reality behind her grandmother’s dress, never realizing she was being protected.

“Anyone who takes immense joy in someone else’s death is sick.”

A sharp voice reached Rose’s ears where she stood rooted to the ground outside the café. She lifted her head with a start, and a single teardrop slid down her cheek. She didn’t even know her eyes had filled with tears.

The speaker seemed to be a man dining at the table beside the loudly laughing customers. He was a tall man with ashen hair. His menacing expression enhanced the disgust in his words.

“Shopkeep, my bill.”

At the man’s summons, the café owner nearly tripped over himself as he ran out from behind the counter. “Yes, sir!”

The two customers who had been enjoying a good laugh were irritated over this uncalled-for interruption. They just wouldn’t let it go and had to say more to the man, without hiding their ire.

“Hey, buddy, it’s not a someone who died...but a *witch*, y’know?”

“Your point? Witches are people, too.”

The drunk customer was the one who challenged him, but he was silenced by how easily the man dismissed him. Shame washed over his face as if he had never deigned to think that the Witch might be an actual person.

“Has the Witch ever done anything bad to you?” the man challenged with a seriousness that was hard to argue with.

“No...”

“If it were me, I’d curse the rude bastards who rejoiced over my death. Say your prayers and hope that she is, indeed, a good witch.”

The man flayed the customers with a piercing glare, grabbed his cloak off the back of his chair, and stood.

When he turned around, he caught Rose’s eye outside the café. In the sunlight, his eyes were the blue of a shadow cast upon fresh winter snow.

Rose held her breath and worked up the courage to thank him, but he promptly broke their locked gaze. He had no idea that the very witch they were discussing was standing right in front of him. Whenever Rose went into the city, she shed the dark robe that marked her as a witch, as was her habit during the time her grandmother was still alive. She wore a black handkerchief around her hair since she was in mourning, but that wasn’t enough to make anyone think she was a witch.

The man fastened his fluttering cloak over his shoulders and gallantly walked off. The eye-catching indigo cloth rippled against his back in waves with his gait.

“Hey, Harij!”

“Sir Azm, please wait!”

The other men who had been seated at the table with Harij hurried to their feet. They all snatched up cloaks the same stunning shade of indigo.

Fear surged through the customers sitting at the café.

“C-Crap! He’s with the knights!”

“I sure hope you didn’t tick him off! This café isn’t responsible for its patrons!”

“Isn’t Azm the name of Heizlan’s lord?”

The café was in an uproar, but Rose wasn't listening anymore. Her full attention was anchored on Harij and the indigo cloak flapping at his back as he walked.

"Harij Azm..." Her heart squeezed after uttering the name she had only just learned.

On that day, Rose fell in love.

In love with someone she could never have.

∴ ∴ ∴

THEN one day, the man she had a one-sided crush on for four years arrived at her front door—seeking a love potion to use on the person he loved.

That's a good enough reason for me to sulk, Rose thought as she ground out her feelings by turning the quern-stone.

Prepare the requested potion in order to put food on the table—witches lived by that creed, and as a witch, Rose did the same on her small island.

But she couldn't feed herself by only taking requests for specialty items crafted solely by witches.

Rose sold ordinary curatives to the merchant who regularly dropped by the hermitage. Special potions brewed by witches were too expensive to keep in stock.

"Special hair tonic that makes old hair healthy again if you leave it in for several minutes before washing it out."

"Oils that will make you popular with the ladies if you use it to wash under your arms."

"Salve that will make you warm if you rub it in your hands."

"Powders that will relieve itchy soles."

These were some of the most popular daily necessities people wanted to buy even though they were all ordinary curatives no one would assume were made by a witch. The plus was that they were cheap to make. She made them in large batches. Medicines for colds were naturally a part of her repertoire, but since

almost every village had its own doctor these days, the demand for it was in decline. People would rather buy their medicine from a doctor than a witch.

Rose was currently in the process of making a powder that repelled insects when burned. Insect repellent was highly useful not only in one's personal life, but also in fields, so it was in high demand. She needed to create a large batch for the upcoming harvest.

Once she finished her work, Rose stood up. Turning the quern-stone for hours caused her arms and back to ache. She started to stretch when her back bumped into a random magic tool propped against the wall. There were more objects stuffed in the room than open space in the cramped hovel.

Ding-a-ling.

A loud ringing filled the shack. Whenever someone approached the dinghy docked on the opposite shore, the bell in the hermitage was rigged to ring. Rose took two long strides over to the window and peered at the forest on her tippy-toes.

It turned out a deer had set off the bell, not a customer. She sighed with a mix of disappointment and relief.

The dinghy bobbed up and down on the lake without a care toward how she felt. At first glance, the small boat looked like it could be taken only one way, from the forest to the hermitage, but it was actually connected to the island by rope. By pulling the rope reel located on the dock in her garden, she could tow the dinghy to her. Therefore, even if the dinghy was on the forest side, Rose could go out by boat.

While the option to leave was there, she generally chose the life of a shut-in. She rarely boarded the dinghy to travel outside the forest.

She walked away from the window with her robe dragging behind her. Dust had turned her black robe gray. She wanted to wash it but couldn't, because she didn't know when Harij might visit. The robe was pivotal in hiding the emotions she couldn't conceal.

"I have to buy another one..."

She had been using her grandmother's and mother's hand-me-downs all this

time but had worn out or burned them while brewing potions, so she was wearing the last intact robe she had. The merchant's next visit was two weeks away. That was a long time. She brought her sleeve to her nose and sniffed. It kind of reeked.

Smelling bad was worse than not having a robe to hide under. After struggling with the two choices, Rose decided on the troublesome option of washing it.

She grabbed several bottles from the shelf and dragged a wooden tub outside.

The lake was only a few steps away.

Surrounding the hovel on all sides, it sparkled radiantly under the bright sun. Dipping her hands in the water made them so cold it hurt; the water was freezing to the point it almost felt holy. Her ancestors may have settled in such a remote place because of this beautiful body of water. After all, high-quality raw materials were crucial to the creation of a witch's secret potions.

Rose decided she might as well water the field while she was at it. She removed her robe and also her dress, leaving on only a chemise. She then scrubbed her clothes with the "potion to remove stubborn stains" that she had poured into the tub.

After debating it for a moment, she also poured in a "potion to sprinkle on your neck before a date." She didn't do it for any particular reason. Then she figured she might as well wash her hair with the fluffy white bubbles. She didn't do that for any particular reason, either.

Ding-a-ling.

The bell rang again. Because it also served as a warning system, it was adjusted so she could hear it wherever she was no matter what she was doing.

"...No waaay," she uttered in horror. How could it ring at a time when she not only was wearing just a thin chemise, but also had a head full of soap bubbles?

She had almost no relationship with the people who lived anywhere near the forest. People rarely traveled this deep into the woods, either.

It can't be. What if he came right now...?

No, he wouldn't. He has only ever visited me at night.

Even though she knew his visiting habits, she nervously looked up while feeling her heart sink into the pit of her stomach.

There he was—the same deer as before, with what she could swear was a smug look.

“Oh my gosh! Aaaah!”

Unable to take out her anger on anything else, she squeezed the side of the tub.

I really, really wouldn't have minded if it was him! I really wasn't washing up for any particular reason having to do with him!

She roughly rinsed out her hair and then dove into the lake with the chemise on. The icy coldness of the water permeated her body. After rinsing bubbles and dirt off underwater, she surfaced. The chemise that had been clinging to her body spread out in the water. She went ahead and just floated on the surface.

“...I wore myself out for no reason...”

She wasn't used to the wild swing in her emotions. Rose had lived a long time alone, and she had gone through life repeating the same rote schedule every day.

Even the one-sided love she had developed four years ago was merely something she enjoyed reflecting on as a good memory.

Rose never intended to face her frank and raw emotions like this.

Aside from the merchant who came by on his runs, the Witch only received one visitor every few months, and even that wasn't always so. That was why her heart jumped and sank every time the bell jangled.

Harij wasn't coming to see Rose. He was coming to see the Witch.

Therefore, Harij wouldn't care in the least if her hair was covered in bubbles or if she stank.

“I have to make myself understand that better,” she muttered with blue lips

as she closed her eyes. Icy water flowed past her cheeks.

∴ ∴ ∴

“**THIS** is the rare fabric made from embroidering a flower that only blooms at the bottom of an oasis with beads crafted by a royal glass craftsman. And this is the pelt of a deep-sea monster that only surfaces during the Midnight Sun, which was procured from overseas. This colorful fabric here is indeed dyed with holy water from the Kingdom of Snow—the vivid color won’t fade no matter how often it’s washed.”

“I see...” Rose feigned indifference, though she was overwhelmed.

Colorful and resplendent fabrics were laid out in front of her, taking up more space than the narrow room had to offer. There was barely a place to stand because of Rose’s laziness with cleaning up, which spoke volumes of the merchant’s talent for displaying his wares.

“Now then, has anything caught your fancy, fair Witch of the Lake Rose?” asked the fox-eyed man who made even a humble witch feel like a princess. Tien Công, the merchant who had been selling to her family since her grandmother’s generation, smiled.

Rose held up one of the fabrics to hide from his all-knowing smile.

Her current predicament was caused by what was meant to be a casual request.

“By any chance, could you sell me a robe? Anything will do.”

Rose had broached the subject with an air of indifference while selling potions to Tien. But the merchant had known her since she was a little girl. His intuition picked up on more than what she was saying. The next day, he ferried across a store’s worth of goods on the boat, nearly tipping over in the process.

“By the way, I highly recommend the lavender material. I would love to see you in rose pink the most, but—”

“Absolutely not.”

Shuddering, Rose shook her head at the cloth he held up, which was so brightly colored it stung the eyes.

“I thought you would say that.”

Tien’s smart-aleck shrug irked Rose. She wanted to shove a pill in his mouth that “makes a monster with a black luster descend upside down when placed in the corner of the house.”

“Why did you only bring bright colors...?”

“You, the girl who didn’t have the slightest interest in dressing up because you could still wear your mother’s hand-me-downs, asked me for clothing. Can you blame me for going all-out? You wouldn’t even let me make you a robe after you took on the title of Witch of the Lake, despite how much I tried to persuade you. Don’t worry about the cost. Allow me to gift it to you as a belated present. I’ll prepare a whole set for you with a bang. Something adorable.”



“Something adorable...”

Am I stuck as a ten-year-old in Tien’s mind? Rose was slightly disturbed by how carried away Tien was getting.

Her first meeting with Tien was from behind her grandmother’s skirt. Meeting a young man for the first time was so frightening as a little girl, she hid behind her grandmother. Tien’s appearance hadn’t changed much since then. He was more than ten years her senior, but he descended from people of a distant foreign land and appeared much younger than he actually was.

From an early age, Tien learned the trade by accompanying his father peddling wares. And a good decade ago, he took charge of the Witch of the Lake account.

As with his father, Tien treated them well, and the change wasn’t an inconvenience. The Côngs had been very accommodating all the way back to her grandmother’s era. Without them, Rose may not have even been able to give her grandmother a proper burial.

Rose couldn’t reject him too hard because of what his family had done for hers. At her wit’s end, she swept her gaze over the flood of colors covering the room. She didn’t know much about fashion, but she could tell each fabric was first-class material carefully selected per Tien’s unique tastes. She couldn’t risk wearing them to work in the mud, boil nuts, make herbal decoctions, or do any of the many other dirty jobs her work as a witch entailed.

None of the colors seem to suit me, but I know he wouldn’t bring anything that will look bad on me. Then she spotted a deep indigo material in the sea of bright colors and unwittingly smiled.

“What’s this? Did that one catch your eye? Hold on a moment. Let’s see how it looks against you.”

“Don’t. Tien, just stop,” she commanded, grabbing hold of Tien’s sleeve. Perhaps she spoke too strongly; she was practically admitting that she had an interest.

The indigo fabric was the exact same shade as Harij’s cloak. Wearing a robe tailored from that fabric would surely make her feel like she was wrapped in his

mantle. But then she ran the very real risk of being absolutely distracted by her clothing.

Tien pulled a large catalogue from his bags, seemingly deciding to cut Rose a little slack because she was acting different from usual.

“See if there’s anything you like in here. These are the colors that will look good on you.”

Several dozen sample fabrics were glued to the page he opened up to her. Rose poked her face out of the hood and took a closer look at it.

“This material and this material may look plain, but they have been woven to have a floral pattern that really stands out under sunlight.”

“I rarely venture outside when it’s sunny, so I prefer something without any gimmicks. Something I would feel comfortable wearing all the time.”

“Then this is the color for you. It’s called viridian blue—the color of your beloved forest,” Tien explained in a soft and calm voice. Rose felt more comfortable with his recommendations when he wasn’t overly excited. He pinched a fabric between his fingers. It was the same color of the forest reflected on the lake.

Rose’s expression didn’t change, but seeing the way she was captivated by the single fabric, Tien smiled. “Let’s go with this one. It’s woven using silk and gold thread, which makes it exceptionally more beautiful under lamplight.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to be prettier for someone—”

“Either way, it is my obligation as a merchant to explain my wares regardless of what the customer is going to use it for.”

She couldn’t argue with that. Tien offered a satisfied little smile when Rose pressed her lips in a flat line.

“Now then, how about some lipstick and blush while we are at it? It will give you a rosy complexion.”

“My complexion will be rosy enough if I slap my cheeks.”

“I can’t stand for my adorable witch constantly slapping her cheeks to give them color. Pinks with a bluish tint will look absolutely wonderful on your

porcelain-white skin.”

“Are you implying I look pale because I don’t go out in the sun much?”

“You have had the bad habit of interpreting everything said to you in a negative light since you were a little girl. All right, which lipstick container do you prefer? On this one you can see the side profile of Countess Taguil, a fashionista famed throughout the royal capital, while this container made with mother-of-pearl took the craftsman three years to create.”

Tien ended up gifting Rose with all sorts of goodies because she couldn’t make up her mind. Rightly assuming he wouldn’t stop even if she asked him to, Rose gave up making remarks for the latter half of their time together.

Rose returned to brewing potions then, too, but that didn’t stop Tien from coming back several days later with a literal boatload of goods, exasperating the Witch beyond words.

∴ ∴ ∴

HARIJ paid his next visit to the Witch’s hermitage well after the sky had grown dark.

The moon hanging in the sky had waned to the shape of a cat’s claw. Stars twinkled brightly to make up for the lacking moonlight. Thin clouds whisked by in the night breeze, casting a shadow over the forest. Harij stealthily made his way through the forest while blending into the dark.

The bell announced a visitor with a *ding-a-ling*, and Rose quietly peered outside through the window. The dock across the lake was faintly illuminated by a lantern’s flame. Spotting the person she had been eagerly awaiting caused her heart to race. The orange light swayed in the dark like a jack-o’-lantern as it steadily crossed the distance.

Rose felt restless, like a hen in a henhouse frightened by an intruder who came to steal her eggs.

She opened her closet. Inside was the viridian-blue robe Tien gifted her the other day. The robe was expertly woven with silk threads of the same color, just slightly more subdued, embroidering the cuffs and hemline. Rose was grateful to Tien, but she had yet to wear this robe in front of anyone.

When she stopped to think about it with a clear head, she realized wearing it would be like announcing she had ordered a new outfit just for Harij.

In the end, she stowed the robe deep within the closet with a sigh after petting it. As for the lipstick and blush, she didn't have the courage to even try them on, as bad as that made her feel about Tien's generosity.

She wanted Harij to remember *her* as herself, and not as a foolish witch who tried too hard to put on makeup and doll herself up.

A dull thud came from beside her hovel—the sound of the boat docking at the island. Rose dusted off her old mended robe with a few pats. She looked at her reflection in the water jug and improved her complexion by pinching both cheeks. Then she shuffled over to the door and waited.

Afraid that nervousness made her face looked tight and ugly, she began counting in her head. By the time she reached six, she sensed someone in front of the door. *Seven, eight, nine...*

Just as she was wondering whether she was counting numbers or her own racing heartbeat, there was a knock.

Rose slowly breathed in and opened the door. The bell jingled overhead.

"Welcome. Did you get ahold of what I asked for?"

My voice isn't shaking, is it? I don't have a stupid grin on my face, do I? Rose looked up at her visitor after taking special care to school her appearance. Harij was quite tall, so Rose had to crane her neck back to see his face. *He's good-looking no matter when I see him.* She wanted to enjoy the sight of him.

He handed her the lantern, which had been removed from its stick. She placed it on top of the fireplace as was her custom. She needed to lock her jaw to keep from smiling at the city lantern perched beside her tiny old one.

"Yeah. Check for yourself."

Rose accepted the ingredients with both hands. Harij pulled out a chair from the table and heavily sat down. She was grateful for visitors who could seat themselves. Some among her clients wouldn't sit unless she pulled out the chair for them, although, since she didn't really care if they sat down, she never did.

Harij heaved a loud sigh. He seemed frustrated, which led Rose to quietly inquire, “Are you tired? I have a potion to replenish your energy.”

“Don’t need it.”

Instant refusal. Even in the poorly lit room she could read the clear skepticism on his face. Apparently, he didn’t believe in witches’ secret potions.

Then why request a love potion?

Rose sensibly pretended not to notice the contradiction. She had already spent too much time miserably thinking of all the reasons why he came seeking a love potion.

I’m glad I didn’t put on lipstick.

Depressed, she slowly moved past the cauldron to her work space. She tried to slide open the cabinet door next to her workbench, but something was jammed inside. She placed the materials from Harij on the workbench, then grabbed the sliding door with both hands and yanked it to the side.

CRASH! SHATTER! Something definitely broke inside the cabinet, but she pretended not to hear it. Feeling someone’s gaze on her back, Rose turned around only to be met with Harij’s incredulous stare.

“Did something just break?”

Rose didn’t answer. Anything she chose to say ran the risk of being a lie.

“...Can’t you clean up the place a bit?”

“Unfortunately, there’s no magic that can automatically clean a room.”

“You have hands...”

Rose answered his inquisitorial stare with a shrug. Her two hands could cast magic, yes, but they couldn’t clean a room. For she was a witch. No matter what anyone had to say about it, “Because I’m a witch” was her response. Indefinitely.

Assuming the conversation was over, she proceeded to look through what Harij had brought, which turned out to be exactly what she had asked for. She was about to get to work when he started talking again.

“Hey, what is this?”

“Oh, that’s lettuce from a few days ago.”

Harij was obviously disgusted by the plate of wilted greens he picked up off the table. Those were the leftovers of what she had been snacking on while mixing a potion and had forgotten about when her work demanded her full attention. Condensation covered the lettuce, and it smelled funky. The parts touching the plate were completely discolored, and not even Rose considered it edible now.

“...You only ever eat lettuce, Lady Witch. Is there a special reason for that?”

“No. Lettuce is the only vegetable grown in my garden. I can snack on it without any prep work aside from washing the leaves.”

“Huh?” There was a one-second pause before he said the same word again. “Huh? Lettuce is all you consume?”

“I eat other food when I go out, but...it’s my staple diet, yes.”

Does he have a problem with that? Is he interested in what witches eat?

This time Rose gave a skeptical nod. Harij rose from his chair, careful not to knock anything over, and skirted around the cauldron to get to her.

He grabbed her arm while she was too surprised to react, moving so fast she didn’t even see him reach for her. His movement was befitting of his rank as a super elite S-class knight, but she wished he would show more restraint around her.

“...Chicken legs have more meat on them than this.”

“You surely jest...”

Harij was holding her wrist and closely assessing her. Sweat threatened to burst out of the pores on her face.

No matter what this man says, he has a nice face. I don’t care how many times I’ve thought this tonight—he really is handsome!

His eyelashes, which seemed to have four times the volume and length of hers, fluttered every time he blinked.

Unable to endure the weapon that was his face being so close to her any longer, Rose turned her head away.

That finally made Harij realize he wasn't dealing with one of his subordinates. "Sorry," he said, releasing her hand.

"Don't be."

It took everything she had just to utter those two words. Under her robe, she pressed a hand against her rollicking heart. It was pounding like crazy.

After regaining a modicum of calm, she spoke to him in a commanding witch's voice. "I shall proceed with the preparations using the ingredients you have brought me thus far. The next step takes time, so please come back in a month."

"You need more time...?"

In response to the depressed grumble she heard above her, Rose gave a professional bow of her head.

Chapter 2: The Dangerous Apple for Witches **GIGANTIC**

columns of clouds soared through the azure sky.

Summer was at its peak. The forest had become more vibrant—yet, no matter how green the woods turned, the lake maintained an icy bite.

Strands of pale-pink hair drifted atop the rippling water. As Rose floated on the surface, her chemise spread as if blooming on the lake. For someone who hated bathing, she had taken to the lake quite often these days. Surely it was due to the hot weather. She had no other special reason for it.

Since Tien had paid her a visit just the other day, he wasn't likely to come by any time soon. Besides, even if he or someone else happened to spot her bathing, she wouldn't even bat an eye or blush. It was the same as being seen by a smug deer.

She had informed Harij that there wasn't anything for him to do for another month. He wasn't the type to pay a visit for no reason, and it was noontime anyway. Harij never came to the Witch's abode while the sun was up.

The month she told him to wait felt both long and short. Loneliness from not seeing him and satisfaction from staying in Harij's memories just that much longer warred within, exhausting Rose.

She was a pro at controlling her emotions, but she didn't know how uncontrollable love could be.

Nevertheless, the one-month period was actually necessary for processing the raw materials. The only reason she told Harij the exact amount of time was that witches couldn't tell a lie. This was why only witches could make potions that were too powerful and potent for human hands to handle.

A witch who used the lie of magic could not use lies other than magic.

Thus, witches isolated themselves from mankind and lived as a different species. Acting unfriendly and being creepy like creatures that go bump in the night were some of the methods they used to prevent others from discovering

they couldn't tell a lie. Rose also imitated the witches of the past and treaded with care in every manner of life so as not to have her one weakness exposed.

She kept contact with people to a minimum and meticulously controlled her words and facial expressions. Her baggy robe was critical in preventing people from seeing through what she failed to conceal.

That being said, all she had to do was just not lie—dodging the truth and changing the topic were great alternatives. As luck would have it, Rose had no qualms about doing just that.

Following that method thus far was what allowed her to survive alone for years.

“Guess I should wash my chemise, too...”

With weather this good, it should dry within a few hours. The robe and dress she had just finished washing hung from a rope she'd tied between two trees. Rose swam to shore to add her chemise to the space between them.

She shook her drenched body like a wet dog, then untied the chemise's strap at her back, and the fabric fell to her feet. Since the fancy green robe was her only change of clothes, she was stuck waiting for the laundry to dry—naked. After all, she didn't want to dirty her new robe yet.

The chemise, soaked with water, was quite heavy. She folded it several times and squeezed it tight. While she focused on twisting the fabric, water dripped onto it from her hair, adding moisture right back in.

“Aaah! Darn it...!”

Chest-length pale-pink hair clung to her skin. Everything about this was starting to annoy her, so she unfurled the chemise and shook it out. The water droplets returned to the lake with a lyrical *splishedy-splash*. Entertained, she became enthralled in repeating the same action.

She became so distracted that she completely let down her guard. When she heard the bell inside ring to announce a visitor, she turned around with the assumption it was the smug deer checking her out again.

She made eye contact with the man standing directly across the shore from

her. It was such a shock she couldn't breathe.

Harij was there.

Rose froze with her unfolded chemise in hand. Harij, standing on the forest-side bank, was also paralyzed as he gaped at her.

For a long moment, they both stared at each other, forgetting to breathe.

Chirp, chirp, chirp...

Small forest songbirds sang with their beautiful voices.

Harij wrenched away his gaze first. "I'm sorry!"

He presented her with his back with great speed. From the sound of his voice, she gathered how shaken the usually composed knight was.

"Hahahaha..." Rose let out a dry laugh.

Her face was surely redder than a tomato. Her heart raced so hard it hurt. She threw her wet chemise on the rope, hid it underneath her robe, and rushed inside the house. Covering her hot face with both hands, she leaned against the front door and slid down to her bottom. The strength left her legs.

Did he see me? He saw me. He totally saw me! Saw this pale skin and my unshapely figure without a corset on!

Rose couldn't care less if Tien or another client saw her naked, but him? Being seen by him made her feel unbearably ashamed.

I can't believe it. I was sure he wouldn't come. I told him it would take a month, and it's daytime! What in the world brought him out here?

Rose's brain felt as if it were boiling over, but she remembered that Harij was still outside. She couldn't keep him waiting forever. She forced herself to her trembling feet and scrambled over to the closet. She had no choice but to wear the robe from Tien against her bare skin. Nothing felt more uncomfortable than not having anything on underneath. Then she checked her appearance in the water jug. Reflected back at her was a normal woman with misty eyes, flushed pink cheeks, and a goofy expression.

Rose gave her cheek a good slap. Then she slapped the other cheek as hard as

possible. Both stung like hell, but it helped her regain a modicum of calm.

She opened the front door and called out across the lake. “I apologize for the wait. You may come over now.”

Harij, who had kept his back to her like a gentleman until she gave the okay, turned around with his jaw set in a rigid line. There wasn’t much distance between her island and the opposite shore, allowing Rose to clearly make out his face.

Harij seemed to have calmed down as well—at least, he was calmer on the surface than Rose felt. Even when he tried desperately to hide his noble upbringing by wearing commoner clothes, some of his graceful behavior still seeped through. Under the bright sky, he was even more dazzling than usual.

The fact that Rose could perfectly make him out across the lake proved that he had fully glimpsed her in her immodest lack of attire. Her head felt as if it were going to explode in panic.

Harij rowed the boat across the lake and tied it to the iron dock cleat. After confirming that the boat was secured, he turned around.

“Please forgive my grave indiscretion.”

He hadn’t done anything wrong, but she could distinguish the depth of his regret from the deep lines in his brow. She couldn’t bear to look at him and instead lowered her gaze to the deep-forest-green robe she wore.

I’m naked under the robe. I’m standing in front of him in an outrageous state. Realizing it made all the blood rush to her head, instantly frying her brain.

“N-No need for apology. I simply didn’t think you would pay me a visit, Sir Harij...”

“...You know...who I am?”

A muscle in Rose’s cheek twitched. Uttering the name of a client she kept to her internal thoughts only was a huge mistake she would have never made under normal circumstances.

Harij’s voice was tight. His apologetic expression was nowhere to be seen—and instead became the stern countenance of a knight.

Rose bit her lip in frustration over her blunder. He hadn't once told her his name. She should have been fully aware of that important detail, and yet she foolishly let it slip out. It appeared the upset over being seen naked was still affecting her. Panic gnawed at her thoughts. In her heart, Rose prayed she could regain her sanity.

"Yes. Indeed, I do."

"Since when?"

"....."

Rose turned down her head in fear of another slip of the tongue. She couldn't come up with the right words to evade the question. This was a first for her, which only served to further sink her into confusion.

"Answer me."

But she wasn't capable of misleading Harij, who had switched into knight mode. Telling the truth was the only option on the table when she lacked the mindset to cleverly talk her way out of it.

"...Since four years ago."

"...For that long?"

"Yes...please spare me."

Aaah, you fool. Stop. Rose wanted to cast a spell on her mouth. But her lips, only capable of telling the truth, tried to find a way out of this situation with words.

"I never divulge my client's information, I can promise you that. I am in a very unusual situation right now. If you keep asking more questions, I will be forced to come clean about everything."

Rose became so panicked she lacked oxygen. Her head spun. She couldn't stop blabbing.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Harij gave her a dubious stare.

Rose saw the look in his eyes and was propelled into further inner chaos. After all, she was naked under the single piece of cloth she wore.

“W-Witches cannot tell a lie! Such is the price of using magic!”

Oh no. I'm a failure. I've exposed the witches' greatest secret that is never to be spoken of.

Rose turned around and banged her head against the wall. She couldn't come up with a better idea to silence her panic.

“H-Hey.” Harij was confused by the sudden drastic change in Rose's behavior caused by his questioning.

“Please don't ask. I truly...am sorry,” she confessed breathlessly, no longer slamming her head against the wall. Her forehead turned bright red where she had been hitting it repeatedly, and it was covered in small scratches. If Harij kept querying her, Rose would definitely reveal all her secrets, without leaving anything out. She couldn't let that happen.

She felt guilty toward all the other witches for exposing their weakness, but what was done was done. They would just have to protect themselves in the unlikely event that Harij spread their secret. Witches were capable of doing so; they could absolutely look after themselves. Rose strongly believed that.

For that reason, Rose was far more frightened of Harij discovering her feelings than the witches' deepest secret. She would rather die than suffer the miserable plight of him—the strong, handsome nobleman blessed by the sun—discovering that she—a mere witch who was neither a noblewoman, a beauty, or a village girl—loved him.

“That's right...”

It was such an obvious fact, it entirely escaped Rose's mind that she was a witch. Witches specialized in potion-making, and potions were used for more than just healing. One of their many uses was poison.

Eyes reddened from her crazed mental state, Rose rushed to the back of the hermitage and ransacked the small vials on the shelf. The glass vials collided with each other, loudly clanging and clinking. She snatched up the potion she sought: one that could bring down the biggest ox in a matter of seconds.

Rose was putting pressure in her fingers to pop the cork when Harij hugged her from behind.

“What are you doing?!”

Rather than a hug, it was more accurate to say she was being restrained from behind. Harij swiftly snatched the vial away from Rose, the same way he might confiscate the murder weapon from a culprit.

It happened so fast, the momentum knocked Rose to the ground. In the process, her robe spread open, exposing her bare thigh. In a flurry, she pulled the robe back into place.

“I’m not trying to put on a show here. I may be a witch, but I’m not a slut. Most of my earnings go toward ingredients for the next potion, and, um...I don’t care much about fashion...so that’s why I don’t have a change of clothes.”

“I understand. Just wait before you do anything foolish,” Harij said to calm her, a hint of exasperation on his face. “I’m sorry. Truly. I can see that you are far more disturbed by what happened than you appear, Lady Witch.” He placed Rose’s poison vial on the workbench. Then he offered his gloveless hand to her, where she was still crouched on the floor.

Rose stiffened with her eyes locked on that hand. How long had it been since someone last reached out to her? She was positive it had happened while her grandmother was still alive, but it was so long ago, she couldn’t remember.

Harij didn’t scorn her for being too scared to take his hand. On the contrary, he gently put an arm around her shoulders, helped her to her feet, and escorted her to a chair as he might a noblewoman.

He knelt down on one knee before the Witch, whose head was spinning too hard to keep up with what was happening.

He—Harij Azm, the man Rose had been crushing on for four long years—was kneeling before a mere witch. An even worse wave of dizziness crashed over her.

“I apologize for exposing a secret that would make you choose death, Lady Witch. I swear on my honor as a knight that I will take it to the grave with me. You have my solemn oath. Please believe me.”

In response, Rose could only manage to nod her head like a broken doll. She didn’t take the pure and humble path of correcting his misunderstanding.

Instead, she gripped her hands in front of her robe, making it look as if she was trying to keep the two sides together.

“How did you know that the potion I tried to take was poison?”

“I didn’t know what the vial contained, but I recognized the look in your eyes. Cornered suspects usually share that same look when they are about to attempt a risky escape. I’m glad I made it in time.”

Harij exhaled a great sigh of relief. Realizing he cared just as much about the life of a mere witch made Rose fall head over heels for him all over again.

As her gaze stayed plastered on him, Harij stood with a wry smile. Then he went outside, only to return with a basket a moment later.

“I’d have no choice but to finish this all by myself if I hadn’t.”

The basket was full of bread. Moreover, it looked like soft, white bread.

“You don’t eat much, right? You are...a young lady. You need more meat on your bones. Especially since you handle potions. Potion-making is fraught with danger as it is—you won’t last long if you fall ill, thin as you are.”

No way. Did he go out of his way to come during the day just for that? I can’t believe it. Rose looked from the bread to Harij.

“...Thank you.”

A trembling heart. An aching chest. Rose didn’t know how to describe the way she felt. Fulfillment spread through her, her heart raced so hard she couldn’t breathe, and she wanted to cling to him and cry.

He’s worried about me. That meant, for even the briefest moment, he thought about her. She had been in his thoughts just enough that when he saw bread in the market, he decided to buy it for Rose, even though she wasn’t with him.

Oh, so this is “joy.” Rose tasted the emotion for the first time. She was unbelievably happy that the person she loved went out of his way for her.

Will I remain in his memories? Will he think back on the strange witch who only ever ate lettuce?

Rose needed nothing more than for him to think of her even once the next time he saw lettuce.

“It looks delicious.”

She accepted the basket from him and could feel the bread was still a little warm. She had eaten bread while her grandmother was still alive and during her occasional visits to the capital. But this was the first time she had seen such soft-looking bread. A lump formed in her chest and throat, and tears misted her eyes. In contrast, Harij raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Wait. You plan to eat there?”

“Hmm? Yes, why wouldn’t I?”

Harij stopped Rose as she was about to pick up a piece of bread from the basket she had placed on top of her lap.

“Clean off this table first.”

He pointed to the table crammed with a mess of haphazardly piled junk. The lettuce from God knows when was left out to die again.

Pointing out her messy living space wasn’t meant to give her the peace of mind that it did. Rose felt as if she had finally regained a semblance of her normal self.

“...This is why nobles make poor guests.”

“I can hear you.”

“You’re meant to.”

Rose wrestled with the mountain of odds and ends until the table was clean. Harij then spread out a tablecloth. Why, the elite knight had even brought that! He had likely suspected that the one belonging to this table was buried somewhere amid the dirt and clutter. Though Rose was loath to admit it, he was right on the money.

The ironed tablecloth was tasteful but simple, and it fit nicely in the Witch’s small hermitage. Sunlight shining through the small window fell upon the quaint table set.

“Where is the bread knife?”

“Will a kitchen knife do?”

“It will.”

Rose expressed her thanks for his lenience on her lack of knife choices and selected the cleanest knife from her workbench.

“I also bought butter.”

“I have spoons for measuring ingredients...”

She returned with a small cutting board and a wooden spoon and took her seat.

Harij, the man she had pined after for four years, sat directly across from her. Rose blinked three times to make sure he wasn't a figment of her imagination. He didn't vanish. She wasn't daydreaming. Four years ago, or rather up until this afternoon, she never dreamed this day would come.

“This is an unusual butter.”

“Supposedly it's apple butter. I heard it tastes good on bread.”

“Fascinating... I love apples, so I can't wait to try it.”

Thick and creamy butter filled the small jar he placed on the table. It was much thicker than the butter Rose used for potions.

While Rose curiously examined the jar, Harij sliced the bread. He took a huge helping of apple butter with the wooden spoon and spread it on a slice. Apple pieces could be seen in the juicy butter glaze. Rose's mouth watered and she swallowed in anticipation.

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

With both hands, she picked up the slice he'd placed on the plate. It was several times softer than she had imagined. All this time, she had only ever eaten hard bread—the kind that usually had to be dipped in soup. This bread's softness almost made it slip from her grasp.

The butter sparkled in the sunlight, and the sweet scent of apple tickled her

nose. She took a big bite and swallowed.

“...!”

Rose’s eyes widened in surprise. She followed it up with another big bite.

“...!”

The second bite was just as impactful. It was that delicious.

Soft, fluffy bread filled her mouth. It was not only soft, but chewy. This was Rose’s first time experiencing such a mysterious texture.

And the apple butter exceeded her expectations. The consistency of the mashed apples was as good as the milky butter. The rich apple and butter flavors married into a heavenly deliciousness. Rose lost herself in scarfing it down.

Harij watched with mixed emotions as Rose devoured the bread with such intensity it seemed she’d forgotten about the guest sitting across from her.

Thinking back, today was truly a chaotic day for him.

Members of the Azm family had been recorded in the noble family directory as supporters of the Kingdom of Marjan for generations.

Born as the third son of a count, Harij was knighted at the age of twenty. His primary duty as a royal knight was guarding Princess Billaura. Billaura was still young enough to be called a girl, but she had all the traits of a wonderful princess—an amiable personality, a charitable heart, decorum, and unending generosity.

Billaura’s older brother, the second prince, was also Harij’s childhood friend. Because Harij had known Billaura since she was a little girl, he treasured her like a younger sister even though he knew it was presumptuous of him.

Billaura also relied on Harij as though he were really her older brother, but she never once demanded anything of him or acted spoiled. Until that day.

“I beg of you, Harij. This is the only thing I will ever ask of you. Please do me this favor not as a knight serving his princess’s orders, but as a favor to the girl Laura who adores you like a brother.” Billaura pleaded with him in the voice of a broken-hearted girl while the determination of a nation’s princess gleamed in

her eyes.

“Please, obtain a love potion for me.”

That kind of potion only distorts a person’s mind and manipulates future actions—both against the drinker’s will. Harij was absolutely against it. However, he also couldn’t reject such a heartfelt request from Billaura, who, until now, had never once asked him for even the smallest of favors.

Visiting the Witch as a knight in direct service to Princess Billaura risked scandalizing her name. Thus, Harij paid the Witch a clandestine visit.

The Witch’s dwelling place was said to be hidden deep within the forest, the exact location a mystery. After losing his way more times than he would like to admit, Harij arrived at a hovel that looked as if it would be blown right off its foundation during a windstorm. This was the Witch’s hermitage.

And the first witch he had ever met lived in a room that was shockingly dark and dirty. She always hid under a baggy old robe and sent him away on awfully questionable fetch quests.

As time passed, his suspicion of the Witch escalated. There was no common ground between this upright knight who lived for justice and the witch who was entirely shrouded in darkness.

That was why he had been greatly surprised to see the Witch surface from the water. He thought he had stumbled across a fairy living in the lake. The sight of her was too surreal.

He assumed she didn’t venture into the sunlight much, for her pure-white skin was as beautiful as snow. The court noblewomen who dusted their faces with white powder to achieve a similar look would surely be jealous. Try as he might, Harij couldn’t tear his gaze from her and the water droplets sparkling in her pale-pink tresses.

He hadn’t thought she was an old woman, but he’d never imagined she was a young lady, either. It never even occurred to Harij that a woman this young would be living out here alone.

By the time Harij put two and two together and realized it wasn’t a fairy but the Witch—she noticed his presence. Her dark-green eyes, which usually stayed

hidden beneath the shadow of her hood, had widened.

Harij sincerely regretted his actions. He had been too stunned by the sight of her that he failed to look away and ended up with a clear view of her naked body, without realizing it would so unsettle the always-composed witch that she'd choose to take her own life with poison rather than face him. On the bright side, the incident taught Harij a lot.

He learned the Witch was a young woman and that witches were incapable of lying in spite of how suspicious they appeared. All those unreasonable, merciless tasks she gave weren't to get rid of him, but were necessary for the potion. He thought all this time that she was ripping him off, when it turned out she could hardly afford to have a dress made because the majority of her asking price went to materials. He discovered that the witch he could never get a good read on was actually a normal woman capable of embarrassment.

And lastly, he learned that she was very fond of bread spread with apple butter.

"...Do you live here alone, Lady Witch?"

When he bought the freshly baked bread in the city, it was actually because he was afraid the thin witch would die from starvation before finishing the potion.

She wasn't on the brink of death, of course. But seeing her apple-colored cheeks stuffed with bread, he knew he'd made the right choice.

He should take his leave soon given her present attire. But the recent memory of how she'd curled in on herself, prepared to take her own life in a bout of depression, made him fear she might truly die if he left her alone right now.

He was relieved she enjoyed the bread he'd rushed outside to get for her.

Showing poor table manners, the Witch licked the apple butter off her fingers and stared at Harij.

"Hmm? Yes, I live alone."

"Isn't that too dangerous?"

It was already risky enough for anyone to live alone, and those dangers

multiplied for a young woman. While there may not be many crooks willing to sneak into a shady old witch's abode, there was an endless supply of scoundrels ready to steal inside a beautiful young lady's home.

The Witch blinked at him as if to inquire why he would ask such a question at this juncture.

He couldn't very well admit that he'd had the wrong idea about her age all this time, so Harij cleverly chose silence.

"Well...it can be. But I avoid the danger by keeping to myself, and I don't get many visitors. Whenever someone questionable comes by, I immediately hide in the cellar under the floorboards."

From the way she spoke, he gathered she had experienced that quite often. Imagining the Witch waiting, shivering, in the dark under the floorboards for some scoundrel to leave was cause for great concern.

"...You have been living like this all along?"

"Yes, my entire life," the Witch said without inflection.

She spoke as if it were only natural, being alone and looking out for herself. As if it was a fact that didn't need mentioning.

It worried Harij, but he couldn't find the right words to say in response.

It just wasn't proper. A young lady deserved to be kept safe by someone. Whether that be their guardian or by their guardian preparing a dowry and marrying them off.

Women should be protected. Harij was raised with that belief, as most noblemen were.

Yet, even if he held such a belief, what could he say as someone who was neither involved with nor responsible for her?

So Harij did the one thing he could and smeared apple butter on a second slice of bread and placed it in front of the Witch. This time, he applied double the amount.

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“PARDON the intrusion.”

Of all the unbelievable things, Harij came the next day, too. Carrying yet another delicious-smelling basket with him to boot. There was still plenty of time before the one month to prep the potion was up. Harij should have been well aware he had no business to attend to at the Witch’s hermitage right now.

He gracefully took a seat and waited after handing the food over to Rose, who stared at him with a muscle twitching in her cheek.

“...I beg your pardon, but my home isn’t a destination for hanging out...,” Rose said bluntly, unsure of why he came.

Still, she couldn’t stop from taking an excited peek inside the basket. Yesterday’s bread tasted heavenly. Whatever he brought today, she had high expectations for it.

After what happened yesterday, Rose was afraid that things were going to become even more awkward than before, but it had quite the opposite effect—she was able to speak more naturally with him now. It turned out to be a good case of shock therapy.

Well, at least I forgot what I showed off yesterday. It totally didn’t happen.

“Don’t worry about it,” Harij said, taking out a book he had on him. He then proceeded to read it.

She had no idea what his comment or his actions meant, but she was willing to let it slide because the goodies he brought today smelled heavenly.

What taste is waiting for me? I want to cut into it this instant!

Rose, who hadn’t experienced a regular diet before, was entirely fascinated by everything Harij brought. It was safe to say that he had tamed her with food.

When she stood in the former kitchen, where her workbench had taken over, Harij peered up from his book and said, “Put a lot of tea leaves in my cup.”

“Oh, right.”

It didn’t occur to her to serve him tea. Until now, Harij had left the moment his business was finished, implying he didn’t want to stay in her hovel a second longer than necessary. So was this his way of declaring he planned to stay for a

while? What in the world changed his mind?

The Witch's hermitage was neither a hangout nor a café, but she couldn't refuse him after he'd delivered delicious food to her.

Somehow, Rose managed to open and close the cabinet that was still a terrible mess with some mighty loud crashes, all while successfully unearthing a tea tin. She had received it ages ago as a thank-you gift from a certain esteemed member of the peerage for preparing a secret potion.

Rose looked inside and couldn't help but utter aloud, "Oh dear, it's moldy."

"Stop right there. You better not be planning on brewing *that!*" Harij stormed over to Rose and snatched the tea tin from her hand. Next to the stunned witch, Harij peeked into the tin. After a long moment, he softly closed the lid in silence. "I'll bring some tea leaves with me tomorrow."

"If you say so... Wait, what? You are coming again tomorrow?!"

"Yes. Do you have any tea preferences?"

"...No. I certainly do not, but..." Rose fumbled over her response.

She was bewildered by the sudden increase in Harij's visits. It wasn't *necessarily* a problem, because other visitors never came during this hour and he wouldn't distract from her potion-making. The real problem was whether her heart would last with the object of her affections being around all the time.

Oblivious to her feelings, Harij cocked an eyebrow. "But?"

"Well...I was wondering if you have the time to visit this often."

"I visit because I have the time."

Of course he does, Rose stated the obvious in her thoughts.

"...My subordinates have been on my case about not taking any days off. They apparently want me to use up my paid leave until the large-scale reassignment takes place soon."

Ignorant of the way of the world, Rose could only tilt her head.

"Long story short, instead of taking a whole day off, I'm extending my lunch breaks."

Harij put it in simpler terms, but Rose still couldn't quite wrap her head around the concept. What she did take away from it was that Harij was going out of his way to visit her. With gift baskets of food.

Feeling Rose's gaze upon him, Harij glanced out the window.

"I can relax here."

She followed his gaze out the window to where greenery grew in abundance. Summer in the forest was Rose's favorite season of the year. Young green sprouts took over, and sunlight shone through the tree cover, brightening the year-long dark forest.

"Do you like the woods?"

"Hmm? Yeah."

"Me too. I like it a lot."

Rose had been looking at the woods since the day she was born and she still never tired of it. For a witch who lived together with nature, the changes in the forest were also a lifeline. Keeping a careful eye on even the smallest of daily changes allowed her to discover new things every day. The same could also be said of her crush.

Delighted by this new discovery, her lips spread into a slight smile behind her sleeve.

"I'm afraid I don't have any black tea. Will hot water do?"

"...Good enough."

Harij seemed surprised by her offering plain hot water, but he didn't complain. His attitude toward her had softened significantly. Perhaps he was staying longer not just because he enjoyed the forest, but also because he had gotten used to being in the presence of the Witch.

Rose opened the basket while she waited for the water to boil in the pot. Inside was a gorgeous tart that dazzled the eye like the most cherished jewelry inside a noblewoman's jewelry box.

"What is this, sir?"

“Tarte tatin, supposedly.”

“*Tarte ta·tin...?*”

Even the name had a lovely ring to it. Rose couldn't help repeating it. *Tarte tatin*. She was enjoying the tart before she even tasted it. The tarte tatin resembled an apple pie that had been accidentally turned over. Apples cut in various sizes and shapes, then sautéed in butter and sugar, sat snugly in the pie pan. The caramelized apples twinkled in the sunlight like gems.

It would be a waste to eat such a work of art. Rose deeply inhaled the rich aroma. The smell of spices and juicy apples intermingled with the sweetness. She caught a hint of what might be cinnamon and rum.

Cutting it with a kitchen knife proved difficult. Although the evenly sautéed apples were tender, Rose had to apply pressure to cut through the harder bottom layer. When she cut into the corner, her knife sliced into a hardened piece of caramel with a crisp crunch. She stifled a tiny scream at the sound that reminded her of cutting through bone.

A sigh of relief slipped from her when she finally managed to cut a piece. The dessert was beautiful from above, but the cross-sectional view was yet another sight to behold. The tender, sweetly sautéed apples looked like they drank a cup of caramel and then napped in what they couldn't finish.

The dark amber interior drew a beautiful contrast with the browned pastry crust, making Rose wish she could stare at it forever. But a tart's true value came from eating it. She returned to the table with the cups of hot water and slices of tarte tatin. Harij put his book aside to eat.

“Thank you for dessert,” Rose said, expressing her gratitude, and plunged her fork into her slice. Soft apples spilled out of the pastry. She glanced over at Harij. The tart maintained its perfect shape for him as he ate it with a poised expression. Rose brought the tart to her mouth in nervous anticipation.

“...!”

The invigorating smell of apples and the bittersweet caramel brought Rose great joy. The color may have been cooked out of the apples until they turned translucent, but their crunch was alive and well.

Before such divine deliciousness, Rose put down her fork and prayed. *God was here.*

Harij briefly watched her reaction before moving his fork without saying anything.

Rose washed the dishes as soon as they finished eating. She was confident she would leave them lying around collecting mold if she waited for Harij to leave. Though it was extra work, she told herself washing dishes took less effort than the rest of life's necessities as she forced her hands to move.

For that matter, she felt insecure serving Harij food on the dishes she used herself, especially if he planned to come more frequently. The few times she had served him so far, it was done on mismatched plates.

The dishes her grandmother used while she was still alive must have been somewhere in the hanging cabinet above the sink. Rose tried in vain to reach the cabinet. Instead, her brand-new viridian-blue robe got splashed with water. After wearing it once, she had realized it was just like every other cloth. Now she wouldn't hesitate to wear it while making potions or working in the field.

Standing on tiptoe didn't do the trick, either. So she gave up to search for a good size wooden box to stand on.

"What are you trying to get down?" Harij asked from directly behind her.

"Oh...don't trouble yourself, sir. Please sit back down."

As someone who rarely interacted with others, Rose wasn't used to people showing her the kindness most took for granted. Experiencing just a simple taste of kindness from her crush made her heart melt. She didn't want to fall even harder for him to the point she couldn't dig herself out.

"Which is it? Just tell me."

However, she was dealing with a nobleman. Rose had learned from her experience as a witch that things went faster if she just went along with her noble clients' whims.

"...All right. Can I impose upon you to open the left cabinet door?"

It was easier said than done. The stuffed cabinet refused to open. It took a lot

of effort to pry it open even a crack.

“Move. You might get hurt by the stuff that falls out when I wrench it open.”

“No, no, no. You might get hurt instead—”

“You think a few things falling from a cabinet could hurt me?”

He gave her an incredulous look, but every human was capable of being hurt. Besides, Harij’s handsome face was a work of art. Should his beautiful face get bruised, Rose might go wild with the desire to rub every salve in the house on it.

“Please...”

“All right, all right. I’ll open it carefully, so stand back a few steps.”

Why should I stand back if he’s going to be careful? Rose was a sensible witch and determined that any further questioning would only make them both become stubborn, so she stepped away from the cabinet.

Harij inserted his hand and a rod into the opening she had managed to make and moved back the stuff jammed against the door.

After he finally yanked open the cabinet door, a variety of items fell out. Harij caught everything with the nimble hands of a juggler.

“Bravo.”

“You should really learn how to clean.”

Rose chose to answer with silence since she couldn’t lie.

Harij carefully placed the outpour of objects on the floor and repeated his query. “So, which item did you need?”

“The one behind that jar— Oh, be sure not to touch that tiny bottle. Please make sure not to brush your hand against the paper bag beside it, either. It’s toward the back, to the left, near the corner, on the right...”

With his patience diminishing, Harij grimaced at her.

“You find it.”

“Wha?”

She was in the air before she could react. He held her up by the waist.

“Grab it.”

“O-Okay.”

Rose wasn't sure if this was when she should turn red or blue, but she followed orders anyway. In a flurry, she rummaged through the cabinet until she found the wooden box in question. She conveyed that she had completed her mission by bobbing her head faster than a cat stalking its prey.

Harij softly lowered her to floor. With that came the end of the warmth she'd felt through her thick robe—radiating from Harij's body. Relief washed over her.

“You still haven't packed on meat, huh?”

What a way to check someone's weight. That settled it: he might acknowledge her as a human being, but not as a woman. Nevertheless, Rose was a witch. Whether she was viewed as a woman didn't matter. Retrieving plates from the box came first.

It doesn't matter, dammit! Tears are obscuring my view!

She grabbed the wooden lid and ripped it off the box with a vengeance. Then she peeled off the cloth, revealing celadon porcelain plates without a speck of dust on them.

“Yes, I found them! So pretty.”

“The color is beautiful. It must've been made by a very skilled craftsman.”

“I was hoping—” *to use these dishes during your next visit.* Chills ran down her spine when she realized what she was about to say. That was the assumption of a fool who believed he would bring sweets again. Rose was disgusted with herself for harboring such hopes and fantasies.

“What's wrong?”

“It's nothing. Um, I just thought I should increase the tableware I have on hand to meet the recent surge in visitors I have been receiving.”

This is why I hate love. Why do I make such a fool out of myself?

Rose felt miserable. She shouldn't have to make up such an excuse for his sake. Instead, she should've just shut her blabbering mouth. She pressed her

lips together.

One second she thought Harij was staring down at her, and the next he flicked the corner of her hood. The hood slid off her head.

“Wha?” she squeaked.

“Come to think of it, I can’t see your face.”

“N-No, no, no, no! You’re not supposed to see my face!” she shouted, completely forgetting about her stroke of depression in the shock of the moment. “What do you think you are doing?” she accused, quickly grabbing the sides of her hood to yank it on. Except he grabbed her hands before she could.

“I told you that I can’t see your face, didn’t I?”

“A-And I told you that you are not supposed to, didn’t I?”

“You sell things to your customers with your face hidden?”

“Yes, I do. A witch’s secret potions are made of mysteries and secrets. B-Besides, um, right—it’s also a way for me to protect myself...”

“Then it’s unnecessary right now, isn’t it?”

More like, right now is the time when it’s the most necessary! Rose quickly turned away her face. The moment I told you my secret, you became the number one person I have to keep my face hidden from!

However, Rose couldn’t tell him that. She didn’t want to betray Harij’s image of her now that he seemed to finally trust her for whatever reason.

Harij tightened his grip when she delayed her answer. Rose curled her fingers into the hood and said, “Very well. Then please tell me exactly why it is better for me to show you my face.”

“You want to know why? Tell me: Does the rest of the world know about the witches’ secret that you accidentally spoke of to me?”

Rose whipped her head from side to side. He asked a preposterous question. She planned to take the secret to her grave. She hadn’t even spoken of it to Tien, who had known her for many years. She couldn’t speak for other witches, but she was fairly certain they kept the secret just as close to their hearts.

“Then doesn’t that make me the only person you can speak to with your face shown?”

Rose was petrified. Harij had caught her so entirely off guard that she gaped up at him.

“Aren’t I the only person to whom you can honestly say ‘I don’t want to say anything because it will be a lie’ when that expression shows up on your face?”

Rose pressed her lips into a straight line until her teeth cut into them. Otherwise, she might let something strange slip.

It would have been so much better if his reason was merely along the lines of it being rude for her to talk to him while keeping her face hidden. Then Rose wouldn’t have much to fear even if she lost her hood.

Never in her wildest dreams had she thought his reason would be for her sake. Harij was trying to become the one person she could truly talk to after losing her mother and grandmother—the sole people who shared her secret.

Is that why he’s coming here for no particular reason?

He was trying to take responsibility for the secret he accidentally became privy to, to show Rose kindness.

Finally, Rose dropped her hood and offered a thin, wry smile.

“...It has been a long time since I have spoken to someone face-to-face. I might say or express something rude...”

She was incapable of rejecting Harij’s kindness. Looking down at her smile, he gave a satisfied nod.

“Your face is as cute as I thought.”

“...As I thought, I can’t go through with this.”

Rose pulled her hood back up—and kept pulling on it until the cloth covered well past her chin. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought she would die from it blowing up.

She had read in a book somewhere about a curse in a distant world that went something like “Blow Up and Die, Happy People!” Surely, this curse referred to

the near-death experience she was having.

“Sorry! My nieces have recently been on my case about calling them cute as well. I won’t say it again.”

“Too late. This hood isn’t coming off ever again.”

“Lady Witch, please!”

Bastard. Stringing a line of black curses in her heart, Rose waited forever for it to settle down.

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GRAINS of sand spilled through the neck of the hourglass, dancing into the glass below. Spices twirled on top of the black tea brewing in the pot.

“Just a spoonful of orange and lemon, then another. Masala, about half as tall as the second rock in the southern part of the garden. Add half that amount in cinnamon. Spin it round and round in the milk. How much do you need? This much is what you need. That’s right, my sweet. Just enough for a whale to sleep. Top it off with an extra-sweet sugar heap.”

Black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, clove, orange peel, lemon peel, ginger. This song always helped Rose recall her grandmother’s secret masala chai recipe. She smelled the black tea—both the spiced aroma and the song were nostalgic.

For the last several years, Rose only used the stove for potion-making, but she remembered all the special treats her grandmother made on it when she was still alive.

Rose strained the spices and poured the exact same amount into two cups.

“It’s ready.”

Rose turned around, her pale-pink hair spreading out like a cloak in the wind, to bring the cups to the table. Someone was already seated there waiting for her.

Harij had come the next day, too, as promised. At this rate, he was sure to come the following day as well.

Rose couldn't very well send him on his way after she'd heard his reason for frequently visiting this part of the woods.

She kept her hood off when she was alone with Harij. Nervousness over her expressions being on full display intermingled with a shy giddiness she could only assume people felt when they shook hands with a friend in town to reconfirm that friendship.

As much as she wanted to keep her hood on, she couldn't stop now—not after seeing the pleased look on Harij's face every time she took it off, like a boy delighted that his dog fetched the ball he threw.

Harij shut the book he was reading. Two celadon plates sat on top of the table. Rose didn't have to feel embarrassed by what she put out now thanks to the wooden box containing several dishes with the same pattern.

Today, he brought her fluffy white bread and apple jam. The glistening jam in the jar had a sweet and tart scent that was appetizing even during the hot summer.

Harij raised the teacup to his mouth, took in the smell, and put his lips on the rim.

"It has an interesting aroma. Doesn't taste bad for something I'm trying for the first time. Tastes good with the apple jam, too." His appraisal surprised her. To Rose, this was what *tea* tasted like.

"This is your first time with this flavor? Then what does tea normally taste like?"

"You generally enjoy just the tea leaves."

"You don't add any spices to it?"

"Nope. I've also never seen tea brewed in a pot before, either. I think it will go well with milk. I'll bring some the next chance I get."

Rose couldn't imagine what tea with milk and without spices would taste like.

Harij expanded Rose's small world in many ways, but he never devalued or denied her customs. She could tell he was brought up well. Being privileged gives one room to be open-minded.

Rose sank her teeth into the jam-covered bread. It was as fluffy as she hoped, and even the scent reaching her nose was scrumptious. The refreshing sweetness of apples packed every bite with a pulpy crunch.

“If you enjoy food so much, why do you stick to a diet of lettuce? Wouldn’t you rather have a proper meal?” Harij asked, exasperated. Rose couldn’t answer because her mouth was full of bread. “Is it because most of your garden is taken up by medicinal plants?”

Cheeks stuffed like a chipmunk, Rose bobbed her head.

“What do you usually make? You don’t spend all your time brewing questionable potions, right?”

This time he gave her a moment to chew and swallow. *So says the man who came here seeking one of those questionable potions.* Rose tamped down her desire to sulk.

“I also use my herbs to make medicines you would be familiar with. Some of my most common concoctions are Potion for Bruises; Potion for When a Foreign Object Enters the Eye; Potion for Dry, Tingling Skin; Potion for after Face Powder Removal; Leave-In Potion for the Hair; Potion for Rejuvenation; Potion for Keeping Insects Away; and so on...”

There was also the “oils that will make you popular with the ladies if you use it to wash under your arms,” but she didn’t tell Harij. She might cry if he asked for one.

“You make some surprisingly normal things... Some of those are even used by the knights.”

“I suppose so.”

Rose merely made what was ordered. She left wholesale distribution to Tien, which was why she had no control over what went where. Maybe, just maybe, some of her potions were used to heal Harij’s wounds. She would be delighted if they did.

“So why in the world is lettuce planted in a garden with nothing but herbs? Can lettuce be used for potion-making, too?”

“I can use it in medicines to bring down fevers, but it’s rarely incorporated into a witch’s secret potions. I am growing lettuce because my grandmother instructed me to. Rare herbs you can’t get anywhere else grow in my garden as well, so my grandmother often told me to ‘preserve the field no matter what happens.’”

Rose also explained that her grandmother had been her teacher as well.

“I see,” Harij muttered thoughtfully, placing the teacup on the table. “She must have been worried about how you would fare after she passed on, Lady Witch.”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, looking for clarification. Her grandmother used to carp on her incessantly about the proper way to grow herbs, but Rose didn’t see how that implied worry on the older witch’s part.

“You don’t have any other family, right?”

“I don’t. My mother seems to have died when I was young, and that’s all I know about her, really. I have no idea whether I have a father or siblings.”

“You might not know about siblings, but you have to have had a father...”

Rose understood how humans came into this world, but it had really never been a topic of conversation. She knew so little about her biological father that if someone told her that she had been conceived after her mother spent some time inside a tree hollow, she might just believe it because then she would know something.

“Then that is all the more reason for your grandmother to worry about leaving you alone. And she was right to be, because as much as you thoroughly enjoy food, you don’t give it the time of day.”

“Does it really look that bad to you...? I have been eating a proper three meals a day of lettuce.”

“I don’t think you can call eating lettuce a proper meal, but...even that lettuce diet is within your grandmother’s plans for you.”

“How?”

“Your grandmother had a good grasp on your personality, Lady Witch. By

telling you it's for potion-making, you tended to the lettuce, even if you didn't want to, right? It would be a waste not to eat what you grew when it's not used in potions."

Rose had never thought of it that way.

There was a time, right after her grandmother passed away, that Rose stood at the stove. But she didn't think the food she cooked was particularly tasty and ended up developing a habit of skipping meals. She found cooking to be so tedious she even created a Potion for Removing Hunger.

Then she had to take care of the field, which meant watering it early in the morning and staying exposed to the sun for hours while pulling weeds. Rose couldn't enjoy a lazy schedule of sleeping when the sun rose and waking when it set because the lettuce and herbs would wither. Some plants were more delicate than others and had to be given extra care or they would die overnight.

Rose had zero confidence she would have listened if her grandmother had only instructed her to "wake up at a decent time" and "eat a proper meal."

She was embarrassed—and filled with a heartwarming joy—that Harij realized how much her grandmother worried about her without ever meeting the older woman, when Rose herself had never realized it.

Her grandmother cared about her so deeply she had planned ahead for the time she would be gone. Learning about the depth of her grandmother's love brought Rose incredible happiness.

And she deduced that Harij realized her grandmother's unique way of showing love because he was a similar type.

"...I really am in love."

"I knew you would love it. Eat more." Harij happily held out a slice of bread. Did he think she was talking about the food? Rose accepted the slice coated in a thick layer of apple jam. "Delicious, isn't it?"

Boundless kindness glimmered in Harij's eyes. Maybe he was worried about making Rose emotional after talking about her grandmother.

"Want another slice?"

“After I eat this one.”

“Okay,” he said, smearing jam onto another piece of bread.

Rose munched on it.



“Just a spoonful of jam, and then another... Your song is pretty catchy. Just enough for a what to sleep?” As he spread the jam, Harij sang the same song Rose had while making tea.

“For a whale to sleep. That said, I don’t know how long whales sleep for, but by the time I’m finished singing, I’ve brewed a tea that tastes just like how my grandmother used to make it.”

The song was a guide on how to brew tea, including what ingredients and how much of each to put in, how much to grind, and how long to boil. Rose loved listening to this song with the sound of boiling water.

“So then your grandmother taught you this song—”

“No way. She was not the singing type.”

After she said that, it dawned upon her. If not her grandmother, then who could have taught her this song? Who had sung it over and over again to the point Rose remembered it word for word?

“So you do remember something about your mother!”

Her nonexistent father and siblings were out of the question. So if it wasn’t her grandmother, that only left her mother.

Rose scowled hard to hide the tears emerging in her eyes. Hiding her expression was a complete failure this time. Harij laughed when he saw her scrunched-up face.

“Do you always dodge questions you don’t like with a scowl?”

All this time, Rose had always concealed everything—her expressions, emotions, and the truth—behind a stern face. Pushing people away kept her safe. She had it burned into her psyche that only unthinkable horrors awaited should the magicless discover that witches lived and breathed by the truth.

But he just reminded her that she could no longer fully deceive him. And that it was because he had this special knowledge of her circumstances that he was trying to become someone she could talk to. In which case, she didn’t have to bottle it up anymore. She couldn’t. Her lips trembled and she sniffled. She ripped a chunk off the bread with her teeth and munched on it.

In this moment, Rose tasted immeasurable joy.

Chapter 3: What It Means to be a Witch **A** gate made of iron lattice opened. Two horses pulled a carriage down the private decorative brick-paved road. Within these vast grounds, there was a well-tended garden, barracks and training grounds for the knights, and servants' quarters.

Everyone the carriage came upon moved aside and bowed lower than its curtained window until it passed by.

By the time the carriage traveled past the fountain, the two horses decorated with feathers and jewels slowed to a controlled trot. The horses came to a complete stop before the gate where palace guards stood in wait. Behind the saluting guards was the palace where the king resided.

The footmen riding at the back of the polished carriage swiftly hopped down. They laid out the mounting block beneath the crescent-moon door and then opened it with great care.

Harij dismounted his horse behind the carriage and stood before the door. Long fingers reached out from within the carriage and rested delicately on his palm. Then a girl gracefully stepped onto the ground using the mounting block with a flowing movement that made her seem weightless.

Coral-painted lips curved in an arc. Hair the color of sun-kissed wheat cascaded down her slender back. The girl's perfect posture hinted at her graceful bearing. After fixing the crease of her dress with one sweep of her hand, she glanced at Harij and nodded.

Instantly comprehending her desire, he released the girl's hand, which was protected by a silk glove, and walked ahead of her down the path she was to take.

Looking straight ahead with her catlike eyes, the princess of Marjan, Billaura, stepped forward. In her gait, neither hesitation nor weakness could be found.

A maid alighted from a second carriage and held a parasol over Billaura.

“No need for the parasol,” Billaura curtly declined without even looking at the maid. “I’m forgoing my stroll. Go ask Professor Marshall if he can come. It seems that Lady Kosmas—the wife of the diplomat from Nefrit—will be attending today’s ball. Her hometown was Krielung. I want to review the history of Krielung before tonight.”

“At once, Your Highness.”

The maid lowered the parasol and whispered something in the ear of the footman beside her. The footman bowed and immediately left to attend to his task.

“Where is tonight’s orchestra? Revise the song list.”

“I will prepare the changes, Your Highness.”

“Instruct the head chef to add some Krielung dishes to the menu. He may be disgruntled by the last-minute alteration, but you will just have to convince him.”

“Please leave it to me.”

“Also, I want to prepare some topics to discuss with Lady Kosmas. Do we have anyone knowledgeable about Krielung affairs in the palace?”

“Lady Marmara’s younger sister has married a Krielung nobleman.”

“Then go to my mother and ask her to give me some of Lady Marmara’s time.”

“Certainly.”

The other maids from the second carriage pinched the sides of their dresses, dropped into graceful curtsies, and walked off in the respective directions of their duties.

Not once did they enter the princess’s line of sight. Just like her step, her gaze remained forward—on the road her knight had decided for her to tread upon.

She went through several gates, walked down hallways, turned at the corners, and finally reached her chambers. By the time she arrived, Marshall, her history

instructor, had caught up to her.

“I apologize for interrupting you during your time off.”

“I praise God for giving me a student who is eager to learn.” He must have run there. The breathless quality to his speech proved it.

The passionate gaze of the young male teacher that lingered on the wise princess didn’t go unnoticed. Yet no one dared to mention it—they pretended not to know. After all, his feelings had no possible future in which they could be acted upon.

The king of Nefrit had fallen in love at first sight with Billaura, and she was to wed him at the end of next month.

“Princess Billaura, your clothes.”

“Yes, I’ll change. Please excuse me for a moment.”

The princess, surrounded by several maids, disappeared through the door with her head held high, her gaze trained forward.

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AFTER successfully escorting Princess Billaura to her private chambers, Harij changed shifts with another knight and headed to the Order of the Knights’ wing in the palace.

The sound of his boots hitting the hard marble floor echoed off the cold hallway walls. Soldiers had their own ranking system, which was assigned based on their social class, who backed them, and their pure strength and ability. Harij wasn’t just a knight, but a Royal Knight privileged with guarding the royal family inside the palace.

Born as the third son of a count, Harij left his hometown at a relatively young age to become a knight because he didn’t need to succeed his father for the family title and territory. His life in the royal capital was made comfortable by the unexpectedly generous farewell gift from his father consisting of a lovely manor and servants.

“Azm!”

Harij stopped at the sound of his name. His fellow knight Geones ran up to

him, the indigo-blue cloak of a Royal Knight fluttering behind him. Geones's friendly appearance and equally friendly personality helped him get along with everyone.

"Going on your lunch break?"

"No. I have some documents to check first."

Geones waved a small bottle in front of Harij with an understanding smile for what awaited him. The bottle contained the tonic Harij always drank to fight off drowsiness. Geones had thoughtfully fetched it from the guardroom for him, as Harij had been accompanying Billaura since early morning. Harij gratefully accepted the bottle and downed the contents at once.

"You were in attendance at Lady Kvaravita's all morning, right? My condolences."

Ah, so that's why he brought the pick-me-up, Harij concluded. Lady Kvaravita was notorious for being a big talker. The lady could go on for hours about nothing. This morning, too, they had spent far more time in her presence than had been scheduled for.

It has been said that the long conversations between women are the training grounds for gentlemen to learn how to stifle their yawns. Fortunately, Harij hadn't been struck by a tidal wave of drowsiness capable of capsizing his self-control, but the fact that he downed the tonic in a fraction of a second showed how close he had come. Conversing with nobility was one of the princess's vital duties, no matter how boring and sleep-inducing the conversations might be. Fully aware of what her responsibilities entailed, Billaura never impolitely ended a conversation, trivial as it might seem.

"Lady Kvaravita brought more than just her homemade lemon pie to the table today."

"What else did she bring?"

"Diplomat Kosmas's wife is coming to the banquet tonight. Lady Kvaravita convinced Lady Kosmas to step out of her shell as a homebody and join for the princess's sake."

"That's huge!"

For Billaura, who was to marry into Nefrit, the better her relationship with the diplomat's wife, the better her life would be. It wouldn't hurt if they became the best of friends—it would only help. Lady Kvaravita was mediating on Billaura's behalf to increase the odds of the princess gaining more allies. She could use all the assistance she could get, marrying into another country at a very tender age, though she had just become an adult.

This was also the fruit of Billaura's unrelenting effort, for always listening to Lady Kvaravita's long stories with a smile and eating two slices of her sour lemon pie.

"Where is Her Highness now? Didn't she have plans to be out boating on the lake around this time?"

"She is already quite pressed for time and decided to learn what she could before receiving Lady Kosmas at the banquet tonight... I'm worried that she is being harder on herself than usual these days."

Billaura had been so busy lately she barely had time to stop and breathe. Nefrit was a major world power and an important ally in diplomatic terms. They couldn't make light of their union. But— "She is to marry someone who is not only much older, but also already has grandchildren."

"Don't speak of it, Azm."

"Lecherous geezer."

"I told you not to say it," Geones said with a dry laugh as he put his arm around Harij's shoulders. His warm touch shared that he felt the same way.

Nefrit's demands seemed too harsh to be placed on the sixteen-year-old Billaura. They were taking her to be the second wife of a man nearing sixty. Such arrangements weren't uncommon in the long history formed between royalty and nobility of different kingdoms.

Needless to say, Harij wanted with all his heart for the princess he raised and treasured to have the happiest of marriages.

"At least I'm allowed to include a female knight and several of my own maids in my dowry. I'm grateful enough for that," Billaura had said to her enraged knights with a lionhearted smile. Just by remembering that smile, the knights

felt as if a heavy lead anvil were pressing against their chests.

“About two more months to go. After that, we can’t protect her anymore.”

“...Yeah.” Geones nodded.

That was why, before those two months ended, he had to obtain it, no matter what—*that* potion: Billaura’s first and last request.

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“...**DID** I enter the wrong hermitage?” Tien asked upon opening the door. He poked his head in and pretended to look around. He hadn’t visited in a while.

Rose let him be until he was finished with his teasing and welcomed him in with an incredulous look.

“Should I take that to mean you stock up at the hermitages of other witches who live out in the middle of nowhere?”

“Oh shucks, are you jealous?”

“.....”

“I would be ecstatic if you were. Anyway, you gave me pause for a second there. I never thought I would see the day when this place would be clean enough to sit down again.”

Tien, who still remembered the days when Rose’s grandmother was alive, exaggerated his surprise at seeing the area around the table clear. His curiosity was piqued by how tidy it was compared with the clutter encumbering the rest of the Witch’s dwelling.

The moment the cowbell rang, Rose—positive it was Harij—immediately spread the freshly washed tablecloth over the table. She couldn’t really argue the point with Tien.

“I just felt like shaking things up. Are you coming in? Or do you plan to stand in my doorway all day?”

“Whoops. Sorry ’bout that.”

The autumn winds were starting to get chilly. Rose shivered from the cold air entering through the cracked open door. Tien slipped inside and shut the door.

“Fall has descended upon us, huh?”

True to Tien’s words, the forest had turned red. It was the season when animals noisily pawed at fallen leaves to find hidden nuts and berries in the woods.

Harij first visited her at the beginning of summer. She was surprised a whole season had passed by faster than the blink of an eye.

“Good to see you after all this time. I hope the summer heat didn’t take too much of a toll on you?” Tien asked as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

“Oh no!”

“Hmm? Is something wrong?”

“...No, I just...”

Rose loosely shook her head and told herself that it really was nothing. She was being foolish, getting sad over Tien sitting in that chair. At the table where she laid out the tablecloth.

She always sat there with Harij. Self-centered frustration pricked at her chest over someone using, without permission, the special area she had prepared for her time with Harij.

Harij surely didn’t think twice about the space Rose had come to treasure. She had simply put that extra value on his chair in her own mind.

“Never mind... It’s nothing.”

That’s right. There’s nothing to it. There was never any special meaning behind that chair in the first place.

“Did you stub a toe?” Tien asked with a laugh.

Rose shrugged and hoped he’d leave it at that.

“Shouldn’t you clean over there, too?”

She ignored his casual nagging. He had already taken a seat, so she needed to serve him a cup of tea to be polite.

“You also picked up the etiquette of serving tea to your guests! I’m touched!” he teased her again.

Rose picked up the pot and let her frustration come out in a sigh.

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BREAD straight out of the oven in the right hand, baked apples in the left.

Harij treaded along the rugged forest trail, conscious that he was carrying items completely out of character for a knight. His destination was the Witch's hermitage, which he had been frequenting as of late.

Even to his amateur foodie eyes, Harij could tell the cored red apples would make a delicious snack. The fruit, which had been carefully baked in a stove with cinnamon and brown sugar, also delighted Harij's discerning eye.

Two baked apples sat together in the basket. The baker's wife had stuffed biscuits into the gaps to prevent the baked apples from rolling over before he arrived at his destination. Naturally, he paid for the biscuits, too, which made him an excellent customer.

He was almost to the Witch's hovel. When he stepped in some deep leaf mold, he rubbed his boots together to remove the dirt stuck to them. Walking this trail had become second nature to him now.

He had developed a habit of carefully looking ahead when he approached the dock. After all, the Witch had a way of knowing he was there before he used the knocker—or perhaps before he ever boarded the small boat.

By the time he arrived at the dock, the forest-facing window curtain would always be open a crack. He couldn't see what was going on inside the dark room, but only the Witch lived there. Whether she realized it or not, Harij knew she watched him from there.

But the curtains remained shut when he reached the dock today. Was she unaware of his presence?

And I've come with especially delicious apples as a treat. I know the Witch will be thrilled by them. What kind of expression will she make? Harij wondered—and then he realized something was off. The small boat used to travel to the Witch's hovel was tied at the opposite dock.

"Does she have another client...?"

A considerable amount of time had passed since he had first started visiting the Witch's domicile, but since he had never seen her receive a guest, he had completely forgotten she had other clients. He felt slightly relieved to know that the Witch, who made it sound like she couldn't even afford a change of clothes, had clients.

That's right. I don't know what kind of potion her other client asked for, but I have to urge her to finish the love potion today. Harij rebuked himself for being too easy on her.

He didn't want her to die of starvation before she finished the potion for him, and it was that thought that led him to bring her food. Apples are nutritious and a favorite of witches in stories, so they made the perfect gift to keep her going. There was nothing more or less to it.

"It's not like I bring her food knowing it will thrill her..."

The two baked apples in the basket begged to differ.

Harij pondered his decision while he idly waited for the only boat. The sound of the Witch's door opening caused him to raise his head.

Out stepped a young man with looks hailing from a foreign land—and then the Witch followed. She even accompanied him all the way to the dock.

Harij was terribly shocked. Not once had the Witch seen him off. And seeing her under the bright sunlight made him realize for the first time that her robe wasn't black—as he had always thought—but the color of the forest.

Since leaving the hermitage, the Witch and the man became immersed in yet another conversation on the dock.

An awfully long farewell, by Harij's account. He wasn't the narrow-minded sort to become irritated waiting for a boat, and yet he watched the pair with mounting displeasure.

Suddenly, the man reached out. His fingers brushed the hood she always wore low over her face. Harij forgot to breathe for a second.

It was that great of a jolt. The now-hoodless witch's face was exposed to the brilliant sunlight. The man's back blocked their expressions from view, but the

true face of the Witch was exposed so naturally to the wind.

She knocked aside the man's hand. The gesture wasn't one of rejection, but relaxed, like what a teenage daughter might do to bat away a meddling, overprotective guardian.

The Witch pulled her hood back on. Then she waved off the man who boarded the boat, as if shooing a wild dog. The man seemed to take that as her farewell, because he began rowing to the forest side.

The dinghy arrived in front of Harij as he blandly watched the whole series of events unfold. The man disembarked with familiar ease and greeted Harij with an unfamiliar bow.

"Hi there. Sorry for the wait. I didn't think any other clients came at this time."

"I share the sentiment. Goodbye." As one hiding his identity, Harij kept his head down, returned a curt greeting, and walked past the other man.

He picked up the oars and used them for support when boarding the boat. Not wanting any undue prying into his identity wasn't his only reason for being unduly brusque with the man.

Harij was confused—confused by his assumption that he was the only one granted the privilege of seeing the Witch's face.

In fact, he wouldn't mind if he, the sole person who knew her secret, was the one and only person she showed her unhidden expressions to. He had no doubt there was special significance behind that.

But he was more surprised by how much he cared about being special to her—and how much it bothered him that a man who didn't know her secrets could look so intimately upon her revealed face.

"...Hey, you..."

The man called out to Harij before he started rowing. Harij turned toward the man, wondering what business he still had with him, and found his hawklike gaze piercing him.

The man's stare contained hostility as he sized Harij up by looking at him from

top to bottom. Though it made him uncomfortable, Harij couldn't move. For some reason, he absolutely didn't want to leave a bad impression on this man.

As Harij waited in silence for the other man to speak, the man suddenly cracked a smile.

"You have a pretty nice face there."

Harij lost balance on top of the boat. He nearly toppled into the lake.

"Didn't Rose tell you that?"

Harij was paralyzed with surprise. Once he realized what the man had said, he jerked his face up. The man was still scrutinizing him with narrowed eyes.

"I knew it. She's so obvious, explaining away the robe and tablecloth as simply wanting to shake things up... Hehehe. Ah, pardon me. I'm in a talkative mood today. Business is going to be booming soon. I owe the former lady of the house a debt for being such a great customer. I must buy this and that in preparation for the future."

The man, who had become delighted for reasons Harij didn't understand, disappeared into the forest in jubilant spirits. Meanwhile, Harij stood on the boat with a stupefied look for a long moment before finally sitting and pulling the oars.

The water felt heavier than usual; the boat didn't seem to move no matter how hard he rowed. Then again, not reaching his destination felt far more appealing today.

After all, Harij didn't know what to talk to the Witch about anymore.

"Welcome."

The Witch greeted him at the dock for the first time—as an afterthought after seeing the other man off. No doubt she felt compelled to upon spotting Harij.

Harij's mood soured by the second. He was so irked he even considered throwing the baked apples into the lake to be done with it.

"...Who was that?" he asked in a deeper voice than intended. He closely watched her so he wouldn't miss any tells from her reaction.

"I can't disclose the identity of my clients..." The Witch looked up at Harij with a perfected poker face, but the diffidence in her reply hinted at her unease over the way he was acting.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"Did he offend you somehow?"

The way she apologized for the other man's actions as if he were family pierced Harij's already splintering heart. He absolutely didn't understand why, but it bothered him to no end.

Becoming cross, Harij tugged on the Witch's hood. The cloth slid off her pale-pink tresses without resistance.

"...Mr. Client?"

Had Rose grown accustomed to being hoodless in front of him? She merely gave him a curious look instead of pulling the hood back on. Some of his annoyance doused by her reaction, Harij wordlessly held out the two baskets.

Rose gratefully accepted them, as if they were gifts from God. Though it was impolite, she lifted the cloth an inch and checked the contents hidden beneath.

Her face lacked any visible signs of emotion, as usual, but Harij knew she was delighted.

Then he softly muttered, "...Rose."

He startled the Witch more than expected. He couldn't tell for sure because of her long, dragging robe, but she seemed to have jumped at least an apple's height off the ground.

Shock flashed across her features and her eyes opened as wide as they could.

"...That's your name, isn't it, Lady Witch?"

Amused by how her rounded eyes looked like they might fall out if they opened any further, Harij lifted the corners of his lips.

"May I call you that from—"

"No," Rose said flatly. A complete and utter rejection. There was even a snappiness to her tone.

Irritated, Harij glowered at her. As someone who couldn't lie, Rose saying no meant she truly did not want him to call her by name. Even though she let that other man say it.

"Then give *that* back."

"What? ...You don't mean *this*, do you?"

Rose looked at the baskets. She asked him in such a pitiful voice, someone might think he was trying to take her children hostage if they heard. His annoyance was effectively silenced and he decided to bury the hatchet.

"Just kidding."

As Harij walked off toward the hermitage, Rose looked like she wanted to say something to him, but she held her tongue. She trailed behind him, holding the baskets to her chest like precious treasures.

He opened the door he knew so well that he didn't feel the need for restraint. And this time, Harij was overcome with a stirring of emotion he couldn't hide. Two cups sat on the table in their usual spot.

He pressed his hand against the pit of his stomach. His intestines felt as if they were being squeezed in a knot.

"Is something the matter?" Rose stood behind him with the unasked question "Aren't you going inside?"

"...No, I can't...today."

"Can't what?" Rose gaped at him.

Harij wanted to punch himself for how poorly he was handling this.

How could I say that when I've only just come? All I've done so far is hand her the bread and baked apples. Plus, she already looked inside the basket and saw that there are two apples.

The two apples gave away the fact that Harij intended to eat with her again today.

At his special seat.

It shouldn't have mattered. Whoever sat here wasn't a problem. It was none

of his business who said her name, saw her face, drank her tea—it shouldn't have mattered.

He simply thought he was special because he had never seen her with another client.

"What's wrong? Is something ailing you?"

Rose was starting to worry after him, since he was acting out of character.

"Come to think of it...my chest hurts," he answered truthfully, a little out of sorts.

"Is it heartburn? Did you drink alcohol?"

"A little...last night."

"All right, I will brew you some medicine to settle your stomach. Please drink it first before you go."

"...Okay."

Rose went to the kitchen. Staring blankly at her back, Harij nodded slowly.

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SPLAT!

Something splattering against her back caused Rose to stop.

She had gone into the city to buy the potion ingredients she had run out of. Finished with her shopping, she had just boarded the small boat on the forest side when something hit her.

Startled, she turned toward the forest. Her jaw dropped when she realized it wasn't a bird that had swooped down on her.

"Hmph! Evil witch! We ain't scared of ya one bit!"

Several boys and girls jeered behind her. The owners of those young voices raised their hands. Each of them clutched a ball of mud packed with straw and sawdust.

"Eat mud!"

"Wha— Hey, wai—!"

Before Rose could say anything, the kids threw their mud balls at her, one after another.

The cold concoction splattered into her hair and on her face. Undoubtedly, this was what had hit her back. The mud balls, soggy with water, hurt like an open-hand slap. Small bits of gravel mixed into the mud grazed her skin.

SPLASH! KER-SPLASH! Mud slammed into the lake. Rose had become the perfect stationary target because she chose to protect her new purchases over herself. Grimy mud caked her clothes.

Luckily, the attack stopped just before the boat was about to flip over.

“How do ya like that, huh?! Ya deserve it!”

Apparently, they had run out of mud balls to throw. Rose lifted her head. Afraid of the Witch’s revenge, the children scattered like baby spiders.

It all happened so fast, Rose could do nothing to stop it. Slowly, she assessed the damage at her feet. As luck would have it, very little mud stuck inside the boat. Most of it had landed in the lake.

Rose brushed the dirty hair sticking to her face behind her ear with her ring finger. Mud coated her cheeks and hair in thick globs. She wiped the scratchy muck from her cheeks with her fingertips.

“Lady Witch? Why are you just standing there? Muddy children just ran from this direction...”

Rose lifted her face. Harij was there, holding another basket of food.

What horrible timing. Still in shock from the mud assault, Rose’s brain refused to work, leaving her standing there, gaping at Harij.

Harij, however, immediately determined the fleeing children were responsible for the state he found her in. He scowled in disgust.

“They did this.”

“Wha? Um, uh, well...”

Harij took two wide strides up to Rose and roughly grabbed her. The next thing she knew, she was lifted off the boat and placed on the dock. Too many

confusing things were happening all at once; she couldn't keep up. Question marks danced over her head.

Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, Harij pressed it into her hand and raced into the forest depths without a word. He looked as if he might say a string of curse words if he dared speak anymore.

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“EEEK...!” Rose cried out.

Harij had returned with the captured children before she could finish wiping all the mud off.

“Noooo! Lemme go!”

“I’m so sorryyyy!”

“L-Let go! Let go of them!”

“You stupid geezer! I told you to let ’em go!”

He was holding two children under his arms, while the other two clung to him, trying to get their friends back. Harij had returned with a total of four children.

“Is this all of them?”

“I was too surprised to count...”

I wish he would put them down instead. The children’s shouts and cries are so loud, the forest animals are hiding.

“Stranger danger! Coward! Let ’em down!”

“Once all of you admit your mistakes, I will.”

“Like hell we will! Put ’em down before I get serious!”

The bossy kid must have been their leader. He clung to Harij’s arm, trying to wrench his friends free, all while kicking Harij repeatedly in the leg.

Rose let out another small cry. Harij looked like he was hurting, and the kid was being reckless.

“They went this way! Come over here! Hurry! Follow me!”

Another voice belonging to a different child from the four Harij had apprehended came from deeper in the forest. It appeared one of the children he'd failed to catch went to find an adult.

"Look! Over there! A scary man caught the others! Help them!"

Three adults ran behind the child leading the way. Even the adults who came ready for a fight paused after seeing the actual situation.

A muddy woman and children with muddy hands and clothes. The man holding them wore a traveler's cloak, but he didn't look suspicious.

Sensing the situation wasn't what it seemed, the adults cautiously spoke to Harij.

"We were told a dangerous stranger made off with the children..."

"These children threw mud at this woman. Most likely for no reason. I tried to persuade them to apologize to her for their wrongdoing, but as you can see, they weren't remorseful, so I brought them here myself."

Things have taken a turn for the worse. Rose's head was spinning.

The adults grew angry after hearing the story from Harij.

"What have you done?! I can't believe you were throwing mud at a woman!"

"But, Pa! She's a witch!" One of the children pointed a finger at Rose. The adults' faces visibly stiffened.

"We saw it with our own eyes! She left from the Witch's cabin!"

"She went into the city to do evil things! I just know it! I didn't see her kidnap any kids yet, but we gotta defeat the wicked witch before she does!"

"All of you! Shush!" A woman covered her child's mouth. Rose realized she was silencing them more out of fear for what the Witch would do to them than reproach for the child's actions.

The stigma toward witches hadn't changed in the four years since she started venturing into the city alone.

"Please, oh, please forgive these children, O great Witch of the Lake. They are still too young to realize you are a great and mighty witch." The fully grown

woman bowed while trembling.

What in the world did they imagine the Witch was going to do to them? Use her magic to curse them into eternal slumber? Transform the children into frogs?

“...I am not great,” Rose croaked. She wasn’t used to talking to non-clients. She was a recluse and proud of it.

Words escaped her, leaving only awkward silence.

“Don’t try to dismiss the children’s wrongdoing with your false praise,” Harij said to the woman in a low growl, seeing what Rose’s struggle to speak meant. “It doesn’t matter whether they’re someone great or a witch—throwing mud at a person is wrong.”

“But she’s a witch! She’s a nuisance to everyone! They all say it’d be better if she left the forest for good!”

“Hush, you! How could you say that?!” One of the adults knocked the kid who spoke on the back of his head. His face was bluer than the lake.

Rose balled her hands into fists. The three adults were confused to see the Witch shocked speechless.

“Why is that? What horrible things has the lady done to you?” Harij was the only person among them to speak calmly.

“...Nothing...yet.”

“Then how has she been a nuisance?”

The child considered Harij’s question for a long moment before choosing to remain silent. He lost some of his prior bravado.

“People are weak. They fear that which they don’t understand.” Harij turned toward Rose. Her heart lurched. She forced her eyes to meet his, instead of looking away.

“Can I tell them?”

“What?” Rose squeaked, not sure what he was suddenly asking her about.

“The potions you make, Lady Witch. Will it be a problem if I tell these people

about them?”

“...No,” Rose answered in a small yet firm voice.

Rose was a witch. Witches don't lie. So even if people learned about the potions, it wouldn't bother her.

Armed with her blessing and knowledge of her deepest secrets, Harij openly addressed the adults. “Do you farm?”

“Y-Yes. We grow wheat and vegetables,” one of the villagers mumbled.

“Then you must use something to repel bugs?”

“Yes, of course. We burn powders to keep the bugs away.”

“Do you put on a hot compress when your back hurts?”

“Yeah. As good fortune would have it, such medicines have become easier to obtain and even people like us can buy them these days.”

“The lady here makes many of those medicines.” Astonished eyes turned toward Rose. “She hasn't made everything that you use, but you can bet that some of you have benefited from her work.”

The adults exchanged uncomfortable looks. They fell silent, unable to say anything.

“It's natural to fear the unknown—but using said fear to justify attacking an innocent person is the worst thing someone could do. Now, apologize,” Harij said, staring sternly at the children.

Most of them cried and begged for forgiveness, but one rebellious boy kept his face turned away.

“Then I have no choice but to make you reflect—*in* the lake.” Harij picked up the boy and swung him toward the lake.

“Waaah! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!”

Rose rushed over to Harij, afraid he might actually throw the boy into the icy lake. At this rate, she feared rumors of ill repute would start to spread about Harij, too.

“Mr. Client, h-he seems to have learned his lesson. I'm all right, so—”

“No, it’s not enough.”

“I’m so sorry!”

After the thirty-sixth “I’m sorry,” he finally put the boy down. The boy clung to one of the adults, his face wet with tears.

“I don’t have to be a witch to punish you,” Harij said, addressing the children and adults in a harsh tone. “Because I am an adult who can tell right from wrong. If you get the point, then learn to see things with your own eyes instead of believing rumors.”

The guilt-ridden adults bowed and took their children away. Rose shivered as she absentmindedly watched them leave.

So much had happened at once that she forgot she was still covered in muck. The water-filled mud balls sapped the heat from her.

“I’m sorry for leaving you like that. You must be cold.” Harij removed his cloak and wrapped it around Rose without any hesitation. It was Rose who panicked—because now even Harij’s clothing was going to get muddy.

“I can’t—”

“Just wear it.”

This wasn’t the first time Rose thought that Harij was too used to ordering people around. It was kind of funny being treated like one of the troops, and that helped untie the knot in her heart that was on the brink of overloading from nonstop trouble.

“In that case, I will gratefully borrow it. Also, thank you for what you did.”

Alone, Rose wouldn’t have been able to change anything. Incapable of getting angry or sad, she would have just sucked it up and trudged mud back into the hermitage. She definitely would not have been able to clear the stigma surrounding the “Witch of the Lake” that her grandmother had lived with all along.

“No problem. But they sure hit you with a lot of mud.”

Harij started wiping off what was still stuck to her. Rose let him do as he pleased since she felt he was cleaning her up the way he might a dirty pet. The

wet mud had dried into crunchy clumps. Every time Harij stroked her cheeks, the mud peeled off.

“Do you have a bath in your house?”

“You have been inside. Do you think I have such a thing?”

“You can just use mine if you don’t have a problem with it.”

“I have a huge problem with that.”

“Then I’ll help you boil water.”

“Please leave the joking at that,” Rose stressed, amazed with how far he was taking his joke. Silence answered her. She took a closer look at Harij and noticed how uncomfortable he seemed. “What is it?”

“...I want you to tell me if you ever need anything or if anything bad happens to you. I will do everything in my power to help you.”

Harij seemed to be worried about the possibility that the villagers might react negatively to learning that their everyday medicines were made by the Witch.

“I won’t,” Rose said, firmly turning down his offer. “I am grateful for your help. But in the future, I will take care of—”

“You think you can take care of things by yourself?”

“Yes, I do. I’ve done everything on my own just fine until now.”

Even if handling everything alone didn’t net the best results, she would make do. And if she didn’t, she would just return to dust like her grandmother and mother before her. She couldn’t rely too much on someone who wouldn’t be around for long.

Harij frowned. Maybe he was angry at Rose for rejecting his kindness.

But even if it angered him, Rose had no intention of receiving more from him.

“It doesn’t matter whether they’re someone great or a witch—throwing mud at a person is wrong.”

No one—not even Rose herself—treated her like a *person*. Yet Harij didn’t hesitate to treat a witch like a person. He always had since that day four years ago.

Warmth spread through Rose. From the bottom of her heart, she believed as long as she had the words he said to those children, she could go at it alone for the rest of her life.

“Thank you, truly, for what you did today.”

I must finish the potion. As soon as possible. Rose made up her mind and bowed.

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A week went by, during which Rose had finished making the final adjustments without a wink of sleep. At last, the potion was finished.

The love potion Harij came to her for was finally complete.

Chapter 4: The Witch and the Promised Love Potion “I apologize for the long wait. I have finished the potion you requested,” Rose said with a clerical tone and expression, head bowed deeply to the open door.

Harij froze on the threshold with his hand on the doorknob.

“This is the love potion you ordered. Please confirm the contents.” Rose retrieved a small vial from within her robe. She held it out to him on top of her snow-white palms. “In accordance with traditional methods, it has been specially formulated and infused with highly accurate magic. It will greatly stimulate the mind and body, thus increasing sexual desire.”

Harij put one hand behind his back to shut the door and watched her with his eyebrows raised.

“Naturally, the aphrodisiac is only a side effect,” she continued. “The person made to drink the love potion will believe they are in love with the person who gave it to them. This effect lasts half a day. The illusion of true, deep love will permeate the heart, the marrow, and the roots of the soul, resulting in an unrestrained sex drive—”

“All right. I get it. I don’t need to hear anymore.”

Though he probably wasn’t a stranger to such talks, Harij impatiently snatched the potion from Rose’s hands as if he was in a hurry to quiet her. He scrutinized the vial as he took his usual seat at the table. Then he placed the goodies he brought for her on the table without a second thought.

“You said it lasts half a day, right? Is it supposed to be that short?”

Harij didn’t look all too happy to have obtained the potion he’d been waiting for.

Is he displeased with its efficacy? That’s his fault for requesting such a costly potion without confirming the effects first. Rose silently became cross.

“As I already mentioned, for half a day, the person the potion is used on will

love the giver more than anyone else in the whole wide world. More than the person they have pined after for years, more than their marriage partner of many years, their blood siblings, the teacher they begged night and day to take them on as an apprentice, or even their own children. While the immediate effects will only last for half a day, the memory will remain for eternity. It will forever be etched in their mind, body, and soul—it'll exist and continue to grow.”

“I see...,” Harij said, then more quietly muttered, “Sounds like a curse.” Rose pretended not to hear him. “How does it work?”

“The intended target needs to consume the love potion along with the body fluid of the giver. It’s common to put the potion in a glass you have previously drunk from and let the target drink it.”

“Duly noted. I’ll never accept a drink from someone in the future,” Harij joked with a laugh. It was his first smile of the day, which filled Rose with such delight, she completely forgot about her annoyance with him.

After all, today was the last day she would see Harij.

Over the last four years, she never crossed paths with him even once in the city. Her luck would surely be the same in the future. Rose stood there with the firm resolution to bid him farewell for good.

Pressing her lips together until the pain gave her courage, Rose fished something out of the cabinet.

“If you are worried about the potency, I have a test sample. The effect will only last one turn of an hourglass...”

“Oh, are you going to test it for me?”

“Wha?! You want me to drink it?!”

Too surprised, Rose stepped on her robe and almost fell flat on her face. She held on tight to the tiny vial.

“No point in me drinking it,” Harij said, stating the obvious.

It certainly would be strange for someone who was about to use a love potion on someone else to test it on themselves.

Obviously, this was the first time a client had asked her to be the guinea pig for a potion that affected the heart and mind. In their minds, she might lie to make a sale, and thus, the potion's efficacy couldn't be confirmed.

Harij knew Rose couldn't lie; hence, this was the best method to verify it.

"Well, I don't mind, though it's a strange choice..."

Rose knew the love potion wouldn't have a negative effect on her since she was already in love with Harij. She was more worried about falsely advertising the affects it had on her versus how it might affect someone who wasn't already in love with the giver.

"The change might not be as visible in me. Are you sure you want me to be the tester?"

"Yeah. Do potions made by witches not have the same effect on them?"

That's not really the case.

Instead of answering, Rose pretended to prep the potion. Harij watched her hands with great interest as she readied a cup. Nerves nearly made her mess up the mixture she was an expert at.

When she finally finished making tea, she handed the cup to Harij. He stared at it as if he didn't know what she wanted from him.

"What?"

What does he mean, what? I went through great lengths to explain the process to him already.

"I need you to add your saliva...", Rose uncomfortably informed him.

That was enough for him to finally catch on. It apparently hadn't crossed his mind that Rose would be testing the potion with him as the person she would fall in love with.

"All right."

Harij accepted the cup and took a sip without a moment's hesitation. Making young girls fall for him must have been an everyday affair for this handsome nobleman. He was the enemy of all women.

Meanwhile, it was Rose who felt shy about it. Into her hand returned the cup kissed by the man she loved.

She needed to do this fast—otherwise her calm facade would surely come crashing down.

Rose dripped two drops of the love potion into the cup. She aggressively flipped the hourglass over, stopped herself from thinking further, and drained the tea dry.

She only realized the horrible mistake she'd made after seeing the bottom of the cup.

“Lady Witch?”

She heard Harij's voice. A low and sweet voice that made even the thinnest hair on her body tingle.

She never underestimated her skill or the witches' secret potions. She simply hadn't anticipated how much more she could love someone she was already in love with.

He's such a wonderful man. All her suppressed feelings overflowed. He's always so considerate of a witch like me.

Rose always kept these feelings sealed deep within her heart. In front of Harij, she pretended not to be looking at him, and once she was alone, she thought back on their time together and was wholly satisfied by this fleeting, one-sided crush. Every feeling she kept under wraps was being unveiled by the love potion.

“What's wrong?”

Harij sounded suspicious because he perceived no change in Rose. But even his suspicious voice melted her into a sappy puddle of desire. She couldn't stop her cheeks from dimpling with a loving smile.

Rose didn't mind if he didn't buy the potion—she just didn't want to be branded as a worthless witch. She didn't want him to lose faith in her abilities.

“Look at me.”

No way was she going to look at him, for if she did, she wouldn't be able to

hide it.

She needed to show him that the potion worked, but she couldn't look at his face. Rose hid deeper under the hood and pulled the sides together until they blocked out the light.

I absolutely don't want to say I love him.

Rose was neither dumb nor young enough to confess unwanted feelings. All she could do was desperately protect herself from getting hurt. She could escape this misery if she just blamed it on the potion, but she lacked the courage.

After all, she truly did love him.

"I told you to look at me. Don't hide."

"I don't want to." Her voice cracked and trembled to the point of being pathetic.

The sound of her voice was as much of a shock to him as it was to her. Harij dropped the hand that was about to forcefully turn her head toward him.

"Oh...is that it?"

The silence between them was horrible. Time cruelly flowed by. It was so quiet she could even hear the subtle shifting of sand within the hourglass.

The heat burning through her body informed Rose that she was bright red from her toes to her ears. She was perspiring. Just moving ever so slightly caused her skin to tingle.

"Should I assume that you are, well, in love with me right now, Lady Witch?"

How could he ask such a thing?

She couldn't believe it. Was he stupid? Dumber than a box of rocks? No, he was being such a horrible bastard that it would be rude to the boxes and rocks of the world to compare them. That wasn't a nice question to ask a lady who had fallen in love, even if only temporarily. Especially so in Rose's case, as he had been the object of her unreturned affections for many years.

What a son of a bitch without any delicacy! No matter how many curse words

she applied to him in her thoughts, her answer was only one word long.

“...Yes.”

Such a pathetic response unworthy of representing four years' worth of her feelings. Her weak voice seemed to dissipate in the silence.

However, it seemed that the answer she'd barely mustered while suppressing all her love and regret had reached Harij.

She heard him gasp. Maybe he was out of sorts himself, since he did ask such a ridiculous question of her.

No, it wasn't that. It was important for him to know how potent the potion was, which was probably why he wanted to figure out if she had fallen in love with him or not, whatever it took.

She understood the reason, but Rose still wanted to shout that he really was a scummy jerk.

After a moment of silence, Harij softly called out, “Can I touch you?”

This wasn't a question she could answer out loud, so she gave her head a big nod. Just thinking he was going to touch her made her skin tingle in anticipation.

After receiving her consent, Harij touched Rose's arm as carefully as he might a princess. He gently led Rose to the chair and helped her sit.

While Rose was still too baffled to do anything, he gently touched her hands, which were still gripping her hood to hide her red face. Starting with her pinkie finger, he gently unfurled her death grip. The muscles in her hand trembled from how tightly she had been clutching the material.

Everywhere he touched throbbed as if it had gone numb. Her throat was strangely parched, and she unconsciously licked her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Forgive me. Does taking this potion cause a burden on your body?”

Rose finally realized she was in a horrible state of tension after seeing her hands turn cold and white from squeezing them too hard. Harij showing concern for it only added to the realization.

“...It doesn’t. It just hurts emotionally.”

“It hurts?” he asked in the gentlest voice she had ever heard from him. He spoke in the same loving tone he might to console a crying child or to appease a troublesome little sister.

Her spine trembled. Sweet pleasure flowed into her. Heartache on the same level as her joy pierced Rose, and the impact caused her to shed a tear.

“Because you love someone else,” Rose whispered in a trembling voice.

The truth she had been enduring all along spilled out with her tears. Once the dam was broken, there was no stopping it.

Ahhh. I love him. I love him. I love him. I love him so much.

The love she had been holding back rushed forward and hitched a ride with her stream of tears.

Harij rushed to pull out his handkerchief.

“What made you think that?”

“Isn’t that why you requested the love potion?”

She strained her eyes to look up at him through the tears. Her tone sounded like a lover’s simper because of the nasal effect crying gave it.

Rose never wanted to show him this side of herself. She bit down hard on her lower lip. Sobs slipped from the gap between her lips.

Baffled, Harij wiped her tears with the handkerchief.

I want to cling to your gentle arms. I just want to surrender to my instincts and hug you, filling the small gap between us. I want you to touch me. To embrace me. To kiss me.

But she could never say what she truly wanted. Mustering every ounce of self-control she could manage, Rose shook her head like her life depended on it.

“No. Stop it. Don’t be nice to me. Stop giving me false hope!”

“What...?! Just so you know, this potion is for—” Harij abruptly stopped and clenched his teeth. He balled his fist, as if enduring something, and stared at Rose with sincerity. “I want you to understand this: I am not the one who’ll use

this potion.”

Thunderstruck, Rose lifted her face.

Her redder-than-an-apple cheeks were fully exposed to him. Passion burned in her watery eyes. Harij’s breath was taken away by the scorching-hot affection in the gaze trained on him.

“R-Really?”

Crystalline teardrops rolled from her rounded eyes. Reflected in those watery depths, Harij smiled wryly.

“Really.”

He gave a strong nod to reassure Rose, who was coming apart at the seams.

Before she knew it, Harij was caressing Rose’s cheek with the hand that wasn’t holding the handkerchief. Heat transferred to the place where his palm touched. His unfamiliar scent tickled the inside of her nose.

The deepest part of Rose’s heart ached. His thick and supple thumb wiped away her tears. Indescribable joy washed over Rose like a wave.

“...I’m so glad.” Rose smiled up at Harij with her whole face. An unconstrained and true smile.

Reddish cheeks changed her image. She leaned her face into his palm, then grabbed his hand and kissed it. Her overabundance of joy caused her to gently suck on it. Her lips weren’t just soft and warm, but also moist with tears. Entertained by the way her tongue slipped along his skin, she savored his hand with the soft part of her inner lip.

Then she lightly grazed the back of Harij’s hand with her teeth. Something inside her trembled with satisfaction. Finished toying with his hand, she pulled her face away. She gazed up at him with misty eyes as she lovingly stroked his hand with her fingertips.

Harij was looking at her, somewhat in a stupor.

“Sir Harij.”

All the muscles in his body tensed.

“Please, just once, call me Rose.”

She loved the coarseness of his palm, the proof of his many years of training. Rose pleaded with him to call her name as she rubbed the side of her face against his hand.



Her voice was so incredibly sweet and seductive, even she was taken by surprise. In the back of her mind, she knew she was being immodest, but she couldn't keep her desires in check a moment longer.

“...Can I call you that?”

The column of Haij's throat moved. Rose gave small nod, granting permission to do as he pleased. Her confirmation was conveyed through the hand she clung to.

“...Rose.”

“Yes.”

“Rose.”

“Mm-hm.”

Her smile was breathtaking. Passion flared to life in her glimmering eyes.

As Rose, full of ecstasy, gazed up at him, Harij suddenly moved. With the hand that once was in her firm grasp, he lifted her face. He stroked her cheek again, drawing a delighted shiver and heady sigh from her.

Surrendering to the sweet moment, Harij slowly brought his face closer to hers. Their breath overlapped. Just as their lips were about to touch— “Are you satisfied with the results?”

Rose blocked Harij's lips with her palm.

Rose's composed voice, accompanied by her usual poker face, reverberated through the hermitage. The last remaining grain in the hourglass softly fell.

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ROSE handed over the potion. Harij accepted it and paid in full.

“Thank you very much for your patronage. Goodbye.”

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ROSE only returned to her senses a while after Harij departed the hermitage. She had shoved back the raging tumult of emotion inside and plastered on a calm facade to see him off.

It was only now that she noticed how feverish and drenched in sweat her whole body felt. She slid down to her knees and pressed a hand against her chest. Her hammering heart raced at a terrifying speed.

“My heart...aches...”

She couldn’t keep herself sitting up and flopped down on her back. Dust kicked up in a cloud and dissipated into the faint rays of sunlight filtering through the window. It felt as if someone were tearing her heart to pieces on the inside. Pain squeezed at her chest, and she had this horrible aching sensation she desperately needed to scratch.

The flame of love that had grown into a relentless, all-consuming fire continued to scorch her from the inside, never going out. Now she clearly saw how foolish she had been to carelessly offer to become a test subject.

Obviously, her love wasn’t as indistinguishable and illogical as it had been under the influence of the potion, but she now yearned for him even more than ever.

Not too long ago, they had been close enough to say they had embraced. The heat that nearly turned Rose into a puddle at his feet still burned at her core. And then there was also *that* moment.

Rose touched her lips—the lips that he surely would have taken if the potion only waited a moment longer to wear off.

She buried her face in her hands.

“Uwaaaaaaaah!”

She rolled around on the messy hermitage floor, squishing the clutter beneath her and sending her robe flying this way and that.

They had been like a couple in a romantic story, sweetly flirting. Remembering herself acting coquettishly was quite the mental blow to Rose.

“Cough! Koff! Koff! Koff!”

She accidentally inhaled some dust and broke down in a coughing fit. She was acting stupid, but it finally felt like she was being herself again, and that relieved her somewhat.

“Haa...”

She sprawled out on the floor with her arms wide-open.

“Rose.”

Recalling the husky timber of his voice as he uttered her name sent a shiver through her. She scrunched up her face and bit the inside of her lip.

“Ugggh...”

That was the last thing she wanted him to call her and also the name she wished he would call her more than anything else in the world. Harij, the person she wanted to say her name more than anyone, had said it.

Replaying the way she’d begged him to say her name filled Rose with the desire to die with each utterance. There was a secret witch’s potion for causing partial memory loss, but Rose would never use such an expensive product on herself. Instead, she banged her head against the floorboards, choosing to rid the memory through blunt force.

It goes without saying that it didn’t go away even after she repeatedly slammed her head into the floor. On the bright side, the pain helped distract her. She quietly closed her eyes.

“He won’t be using the love potion...”

Rose had never considered that possibility.

She never expected him to come to such a shady place for someone else.

Her chest constricted again. What good was it to rejoice? Her ties with him had been severed.

They weren’t going to meet again.

Should I have charged more? Then would I have become even more ingrained in his memory as ‘that one greedy witch I knew’? Or will he look back once every blue moon on the ‘troublesome witch who made me bring her food every day’?

What is he thinking about right now? How will he remember me in the future? Will he think of me even once? Will he? Will he? Will he? Will he?

Her thoughts were filled with nothing but him.

“Time to clean up.”

There was no end to this line of thought. And what good would it do even if she kept coming up with questions to which she didn’t have the answer? She rolled to her feet and slapped her cheeks, encouraging herself to move on.

Rose took down the cowbell before she could change her mind. For many years, the sound had been a familiar friend, but now it only made her heart jump.

She put away the tablecloth, too. Surely, he wouldn’t go out of his way to retrieve it. She folded it into a tight ball and jammed it into the bulging closet.

The plates and cups she’d taken down for him needed to go as well. She put all of it away except for her own set. As long as no one brought her sweets in the future, she wouldn’t be serving anyone tea.

She would get her hopes up if she didn’t put everything away. In the back of her mind would always be the hopeful thought that a certain someone might come with delicious food again, even though he had no reason to.

Everything she’d shared with him would remind her. Remind her of the time when the sweet scent of apple filled a hovel stuffed with nothing but herbs and potions.

Rose looked at the basket Harij had left in return for the cloak he had lent her. Peeking inside, she found cookies with dried apples baked into them. She brought one to her mouth—the cookie crumbled.

“...I can’t taste it.”

The delicacy she had eagerly anticipated had less flavor than the bland lettuce she ate alone.

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“...**WELCOME?**” Rose greeted in a stupor, astonished by the guest who entered her house without knocking. Of course, she knew she had a visitor because the bell informed her whenever someone entered the forest and approached the dock.

She also had confirmed who it was through the window.

It was she who refused to believe it until he finished rowing the boat, docked, and entered the hermitage. After all, reality was hard to accept when this was someone she was positive would never set foot inside her hovel again.

“I’m seeing myself in.”

Harij casually let himself in as if nothing had changed. She couldn’t detect anything different from his expression.

“...Uh, okay?” she dumbly responded.

Rose had given him the completed love potion and was paid for it. Put another way, Rose and Harij were no longer witch and client. In that case, what matter of business could have brought him to her humble abode?

Doubts creeping in, Rose blanched at the possibilities.

“Did you perhaps run into some sort of issue with the potion?”

“It’s quite the opposite. The potion’s efficacy is undeniable. Besides, it’s no longer in my possession. When or where it will be used is no longer my concern.” Harij shook his head, squashing her newfound worries. “That said, I thoroughly warned the person three whole times about how to properly use it... and about how whoever drinks it will behave.”

Rose shrunk deep within her baggy robe to escape his piercing look.

He isn’t possibly planning to make me relive what happened, is he?

The intimate gaze they’d shared, the way they’d said each other’s names, the breathy sighs—Rose remembered it all as if it’d happened only moments ago. Not only had she planned to forget it ever happened, she intended to never see Harij again.

What was the point of winding up a music box that didn’t produce sound? Rose wasn’t the type to have false hope. In other words, she didn’t anticipate him showing up again.

Sure, she hoped he would look back on his life and think of her just once—that would have been enough to keep her going, but absolutely not if that memory was of her making a fool of herself.

“Please do me the great service of forgetting all about what happened with

the test sample. The potion's effects have long since worn off," Rose insisted definitively.

The aftereffects still lingered in her system, but what she said didn't count as a lie. Lingering affections for him still held sway over her, but she schooled her features into such indifference, it looked as if even the slightest emotion toward him had been scrubbed clean.

The whole thing felt like one big bad dream. She never wanted it to come up in conversation again.

"That reminds me. Before you sampled it, you said the potion wouldn't have the same effect on a witch, right?"

That was not what she had said, but Rose wasn't going to correct him. He might worry about the love potion she already sold him if she led him to believe the effects immediately wear off on normal people.

Discerning that the situation wasn't going in a favorable direction, Rose ignored his query and turned her back to him.

"What are you here for?"

The first time Harij had visited the hermitage, he'd been in a foul mood. Some of his suspicions seemed to have waned as of late, but she knew he had no personal desire to frequent this shady piece of the woods. As proved by the fact that he still concealed his identity under a traveler's cloak. There was no doubt in her mind that he came to handle some other form of business. Her question came from that conviction, so when she didn't receive an immediate answer, she grew suspicious and glanced back at Harij.

He wasn't even looking at her.

Well, that was anticlimactic. She felt as though she could breathe easy again. Curious what had captured his attention, she followed his gaze down to the table set next to the window.

Sensing her attention, Harij turned just his eyes toward her. Cold blue pierced her.

"Rose."

Heat rushed through her at the sound of her name on his lips. Her heart painfully lurched after it.

She never even dreamed he would utter her name again.

How could such a simple thing literally cause her heart to move? Surprise, joy, and regret stirred together and threatened to explode.

“I asked that of you because of the potion—!”

So please don't say my name ever again, Rose nearly pleaded, but she instinctively shut her mouth. Calm doused her burning heart.

The frigid stare cutting into Rose glinted with reproach.

“You put away the tablecloth?”

Rose edged back a step. For some reason, she felt like an herbivore being cornered by a carnivore.

“...I had no idea it was important to you. I will return it at once.”

“I don't want it back.”

Clutched in the scowling man's hand was the same big basket he always brought. Taking a second to calm herself, Rose noticed a rich, savory aroma wafting from within it.

He went out and bought food again. For Rose.

“...I thought you wouldn't...be visiting me again, so I judged it an unnecessary accessory...”

“Take care to eat, not for my sake, but for your own.”

Harij sighed loudly and thrust out the basket. Rose took a huge step backward and bowed lower than the table to him.

“I have already received payment for your order. I cannot accept more from you...”

Please spare me this pain. The feeling she couldn't put into words came out in a raspy sigh. She earnestly prayed to the point of tearing up within her robe that the unspoken meaning would reach him.

Accepting it once would make her hope for a next time.

It would set off a horrible habit of her waiting day in and day out, looking through the window hoping he would come today, and if not today, tomorrow, and if not tomorrow, the next day.

Just imagining herself like that caused her to recoil. What a dreadful future that would be!

Finishing off his order had been a blessing in disguise. It marked a clear end to this sweet and enjoyable unrequited love.

Doing so allowed her to swiftly put an end to the crush she arbitrarily started. A love that involved only her heart.

But to accept this basket? That would take what was a simplistic crush she could look on fondly without involving the other person and turn it into something more. Something worse.

Unrequited feelings without an end in sight are terrifying.

“...In that case...,” Harij started after silently watching Rose on the verge of uncontrollably shaking. His tone started out calm but had a hint of tension, like walking a tightrope made of only a thin thread. “I want to request another potion.”

“...Pardon?” Rose tilted her head, the unasked question of “What potion?” hanging in the air.

With more wrinkles forming on his face than in her crumpled-up blankets, Harij answered, “...Another love potion.”

Surprise beat out every other emotion warring for her attention. With her eyes, mouth, and nose gaping as wide as possible, Rose stared at Harij.

He turned his head away, as if trying to escape her penetrating gaze.

“...For your own use this time?”

“Do witches make it a habit to pry into their client’s privacy? *Rose.*”

Rose forced her lips downward to conceal how shaken up she was by his saying her name. Witches did not pry into their clients’ private matters. That

was a fact. Asking him was entirely a blunder on her part. But he certainly had a cruel streak to him, requesting another love potion after seeing what shameful effect it had on Rose.

It stands to be said that as a witch, Rose had no qualms about using the witches' secret potions. There was but one reason why she didn't pour a love potion over Harij's head.

Nothing but despair remained when one failed to obtain what they wanted even after using a witch's secret potion.

"...Very well. I accept your...request. You will have to wait a long time again," she reluctantly informed him.

"Just how I want it." Harij flashed a brilliant smile, for reasons beyond her.

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ROSE.

That was the Witch's name Harij wasn't allowed to say.

He had never particularly cared one way or another about calling women by their given names. Then again, it was unusual enough for him to take an interest in a specific woman aside from Princess Billaura.

Being told not to say her name annoyed him, but hers was a witch's appellation. He had reasoned with himself that there might be some secret rule forbidding it. That theory was shattered when the Witch fell in love with him after drinking the love potion and instantly gave him permission. She had begged him to call her by what she forbade him to say before the love potion.

By no means had he wanted to say it even once. But he couldn't coldly reject Rose, who had nestled up to him like a trembling kitten.

Before he knew it, he was going along with her whims. He felt such affection for her in that moment that he wanted to do anything she asked of him.

The way she hid under her hood out of unbearable embarrassment from her love for him was so sweet and precious. The way her fingertips and lips sought to please him was seductively skillful, yet her smile was as innocent as a flower blooming in the shade.

The way she fought against the love potion's effects reminded him of the Witch's normally unreadable expression as she filled her cheeks with apple treats.

Did he get caught up in the moment? Before long, Harij could only think about the woman before him. Though he had always been confident in his strong self-control, he very nearly tried to do something to a young, single woman that he shouldn't.

Rose had even sampled the potion to fulfill his order. Despite knowing that he mustn't trifle with the love she developed from the potion, Harij found there was something about her he couldn't resist.

Everything ended all right because the timer ran out, but he'd come close to doing something irredeemable. They made it through the hour without him hurting the Witch, who acted in accord with the potion, not because of any true feelings for Harij. Rose was the epitome of cool after the last grain of sand dropped.

Every sign of love and adoration she'd shown him had been wiped clean from her face. It had disappeared so utterly without a trace, he almost had to laugh at the irony. Where he should have felt relief, he experienced indescribable loneliness upon seeing the icy calm in her eyes.

Leaving Harij in the dust, Rose had quickly finished wrapping up the potion and demanded payment. He handed her the exact amount he always carried to the Witch's hermitage, and they said their goodbyes.

Harij was baffled when he returned to his mansion.

His heart wouldn't stop hammering in his chest.

Ironically, it was as if *he* were the one who took the love potion. Every waking and sleeping moment, he couldn't forget the sound of Rose's voice, her body temperature, or her shimmering eyes.

Thinking things might become clear if he met her again, Harij ventured out to the Witch's hermitage without a second thought, bringing along a basket of sweets as had become his custom. Yet what was he welcomed with?

"Please do me the great service of forgetting all about what happened with

the test sample. The potion's effects have long since worn off."

Rose insisted that she had completely and entirely forgotten all about her expressions of love. Meanwhile, Harij couldn't forget no matter how hard he tried.

"What are you here for?"

What awaited Harij was utter rejection.

Not a trace of him remained within her dwelling. Harij had been taken by complete surprise. He believed they had developed some level of acquaintance, even if it didn't quite reach friendship. He felt betrayed.

After all, he'd expected she would welcome him in as she always did.

Harij fully believed without a doubt that the time he spent sitting at the sunny table sipping tea spicy enough to make him cough would never end.

The petite witch thought she could be rid of him just by removing a tablecloth.

Harij had the irrepressible desire to get revenge on this heartless witch.

"Rose."

So he called her name—fully aware she wasn't under the potion's influence. Horror and regret flashed across her face.

Serves you right.

A dozen invisible spears tore into the corner of his heart that mocked her. That proved it—she was rejecting him.

"Please, just once, call me Rose."

Turned out those feelings were purely potion induced—they didn't reflect her true heart at all. Then Rose had to go and sink her boot into him when he had already reached rock bottom emotionally.

"...I thought you wouldn't...be visiting me again, so I judged it an unnecessary accessory..."

The sweet smell of the cookies Harij had bought for her tickled at his nose.

It wasn't just the tea he could only drink here, bathed in the light filtering through the small window, that he would miss out on. Realizing he would lose everything about his time with her if he didn't do anything, Harij said the first thing that came to mind.

"I want to request another potion... Another love potion."

Indeed, the first thing he thought of was to request that awfully suspicious potion capable of manipulating the mind.

Once the words were out there, he decided he actually wanted to act on this ingenious idea. He had experienced firsthand how tedious the process was. The length of time it took to make was burned into his mind.

But if he spent that much time with her again, Rose probably wouldn't reject him anymore. Besides, while the huge expense would hurt his wallet, if it eased Rose's financial situation even a little, it was a worthwhile use of the money he had spent his entire life saving.

Still not understanding why her rejection bothered him so, Harij laughed, for he was immensely satisfied by his own reasoning.

Chapter 5: It's the Witch Who Casts Magic on the Princess **EVERY** day was punctuated by heavy, gray clouds. Cold wintry winds blew autumn away, and the crisp smell of winter seeped into the morning mist. The chill in the air nipping at Rose's nose foretold winter's arrival.

Rose had a lot of visitors this year, which increased the need to make more candles. Stocking up on firewood wouldn't be a bad idea, either.

Now where did I put my winter quilt and robe? There were a lot of winter supplies she had to dig out of storage, too.

She also wanted to go into the capital to exchange produce for rice husks and straw to sow in her field. But she might run into trouble because some of the cityfolk had seen her face this year.

Haa. Her sigh turned white.

Rose was busier than usual as she prepared for winter. Her days consisted of running around, both inside and outside her dwelling. Sometimes she went to the basement and sometimes to the attic, ending up with more dust and cobwebs stuck in her hair with every visit.

In the middle of her most hectic time, she heard the bell announce a visitor. *Did Harij come again?*

For reasons she couldn't even begin to comprehend, Harij had ordered yet another love potion and started hanging out at her hovel for long periods of time again. Rose accepted him into her home with a mix of joy and fear, for she felt she was being sucked into some sort of game played by nobility. One she didn't even know the rules for. It felt like playing a card game with a knife to her throat—ready to stab her at any moment. She would rather he just got the stabbing over with than have to put up with wondering when it was going to happen.

Love kindled over many years is tenacious and unyielding, which is why it can last so long. She had spent many nights crying until dawn, telling herself, “I’ll stop loving him,” but once morning came, her love hadn’t waned.

Hands full, Rose turned her back on the bell. Harij and Tien were about the only guests she would receive at this hour. Assuming those two men could find their way to her without assistance, Rose ignored the bell and resumed her task.

By the time she could finally take a break, darkness had fallen. The sun shone through the thick clouds, painting the mountain ridges golden. Fluffy clouds dyed the color of carrots, eggplant, and jasmine flowers sailed through the sky. The idyllic scene reflected gorgeously on the lake’s surface.

Rose truly loved these moments when she felt as if she were living inside a rainbow.

A cold breeze blew by as she lost track of time gazing at the sky. The sun set awfully early these days. She pulled her shawl closed at her neck and was about to hurry inside the hermitage when she remembered that the bell had rung during the afternoon.

Now that she thought about it, no one had spoken to her after that. Was the bell set off by another animal? It was hard to imagine the beasts of the woods roaming these parts during this season when they also had to prepare for the coming winter.

She peeked into the hermitage, half expecting *him* to be sitting there elegantly sipping tea at the table that was set up for his visits again. Empty.

Was it just a beast, then? She looked at the forest side and spotted a ball of cloth on the dock.

Annoyed by having to expend the extra effort, Rose grumpily pulled the small boat to her. Whipping her exhausted body into action, she rowed across the scarlet lake. Once at the forest’s shore, she pulled the hood tight around her face, then removed the lantern from the bow and beckoned to the bulging fabric.

“Might you be...a client?”

The bundle of cloth squirmed to life.

So it is a client. Rose stifled a sigh. Hours had gone by since the bell rang. Pick-up service wasn't generally included in her business, but there was the occasional client who waited endlessly until she fetched them. It looked as if this client had whiled away the time by squatting on the dock.

A witch's secret potions fetched a lofty price. Therefore, the upper echelons of society made up the better half of her clientele. Nobles didn't want anyone to discover that they paid visits to such a shady area, so they typically sent a servant in their place. Nevertheless, there were some especially wacky types among the eccentrics who desired potions who liked to make the journey themselves.

And it was those eccentric clients who brought the most trouble to her doorstep.

"Mm? Someone finally came to get me?"

Rose grimly waited for the angry shout or the earful that usually followed.

But what Rose spied through the opening in the balled-up cloth were eyes brimming with youthful intelligence. The person soundlessly rose. Surprisingly, their eyes were almost level with Rose's. The client folded back their red cloak, revealing their face.

"Are you the Witch? I'm not a client, but I do hope you will welcome me in."

The visitor was a girl as beautiful as a crystal, with the bearing of a cold winter breeze. Nothing felt out of place about her demanding tone or her refined mannerisms.

Regardless, her face was pale and her lips had turned purple. A likely side effect of sitting perfectly still in the forest for too long in thin attire. The area around the lake was freezing even in the summer months, and even Rose, who lived there, had to take preventative measures to keep warm.

Feeling a little guilty, Rose rowed the girl back to the island and ushered her into the hermitage.

"It's a bit messy inside..."

Rose had never brought up how dirty her place was before. But the hovel looked even messier than usual with winter supplies strewn about, making her feel the need to at least comment on it.

She remembered the straw bale she'd given up on in the middle of weaving because she had thought *I don't have the time for this!* and kicked it to the side of the room. Straw was scattered over the floor.

Sure enough, the girl was so stunned she froze in the doorway. But then she held her head high and took a brave step forward into this unknown land like a warrior princess marching onto a fierce battlefield.

Of all things, the dirtied shoes that poked out from under her cloak were indoor slippers. Rose didn't know who she was but could tell at a glance that she was the daughter of an esteemed noble family. She sympathized with those closest to the girl who surely had their hands full with her.

"You may call me Lau."

Her tensed jaw and tightened cheeks showed she was nervous, but not here to belittle the Witch.

"All right, Lady Lau. Please just refer to me as Witch."

Rose's gaze wandered around the room, searching for a space where Lau could sit. The usual table and chairs were serving as very effective "temporary storage spaces" while she prepared for winter. Carelessly trying to rearrange the mountain of stuff would likely cause an avalanche. Nothing could be done about it on the spot.

The one place the least affected by the clutter demon's hands was Rose's bed. She randomly placed the stuff that had been on it onto the floor, then patted down the quilt. Dust clouds inevitably puffed into the air. This was the Witch's dwelling place; nothing more should be expected of it.

"You must have been cold outside. Please take a seat."

Lau's eyes darted around the room as she briefly hesitated before making up her mind and nodding. Rose heard her muttering "God help me..." as she passed by. Unfortunate as it was, God most likely didn't watch over a witch's hermitage.

Lau cautiously perched on the edge of Rose's bed. The quilt was intricately woven with various colors resembling the forest floor covered with fallen leaves.

"...Not as bad as I thought it'd be."

"I'm glad you approve."

A client who had become fond of Rose gave her the quilt as a present a few years back. Some of the nobles who appreciated her potions gifted her various items like this as a bonus. Quite indifferent toward the value of things, Rose used what she could and either stored or sold to Tien what she had no use for.

While Rose added wood to the fireplace, Lau pretended to focus her full attention on stroking the quilt until she finally worked up the nerve to speak.

"...You must have been surprised by my sudden visit," she said uncomfortably.

"All my clients arrive unannounced."

Rose poured the hot water from the kettle on top of the stove into the wooden tub. Once the water temperature was just right, she took down a bottle of the "oil to sprinkle on your neck before a date" from the cabinet and added a few drops. This particular potion had a soothing, fragrant aroma.

Rose slid the steamy bucket under Lau's feet.

"May I?"

"You may."

They may have gotten off to a bad start, but Lau gave her permission without showing annoyance about the wait. Rose reached for Lau's feet. She eased off the slippers caked with mud, sap, and leaves. The gorgeous shoes, which placed more emphasis on beauty than usefulness, lacked the ability to protect Lau from the wintry forest. Each of her toenails had been expertly manicured, as would be expected of someone of her status, but her toes were whiter than the ash in the fireplace. Purplish blisters marred her feet here and there.

Usually, Rose was indifferent toward her clients, but it left a bad taste in her mouth to simply look on as a young girl endured such pain alone. Besides that, the guilt of leaving her outside for a long time was gnawing at her conscience.

“You must have been freezing.”

She rubbed Lau’s bluish-white right leg as she submerged it in the tub of hot water. Then she did the same to the left, instantly cooling down the water.

Rose poured boiling water into a cup and added it to the tub. Pink gradually returned to Lau’s cheeks as her feet started to warm up.

Rose pushed the bucket to the side and wiped Lau’s warmed feet with a cloth. Then she proceeded to wrap another thick quilt three times around her legs.

“You aren’t going to inquire about my identity?” Lau’s voice asked from atop the bed.

“You already informed me that you are Lady Lau.”

Lau troubled her lips with a frown at Rose’s response. Uneasiness plowed her flawlessly trimmed eyebrows in a way that was terribly innocent and ran contrary to her demeanor.

She was undoubtedly some princess who was served by a great many servants, but she ventured into the woods with only a thin apple-colored cloak to protect her and not a single maid in tow. It couldn’t have been easy for her to trek out here alone.

“Should I have inquired it of you? As a general rule, witches do not pry into their clients’ lives or speak of those who visit their hermitage. For those who come to rely on a witch’s secret potions, all harbor ardent wishes they can’t accomplish on their own.”

Aside from Lau’s given name, Rose knew nothing about the girl. It was up to Lau if she wanted to speak of the worries and wishes troubling her.

Making the requested potion was Rose’s only job.

Rose intended for the explanation to reassure Lau, but she seemed to have taken it a different way.

“So a person is allowed to seek a potion that distorts another’s mind just because they have an ardent wish?” Lau’s forlorn expression had turned to scorn. She had become so cold, touching her might freeze Rose’s fingers.

She used the same terminology everyone did when they ridiculed a witch’s

secret potions. Rose had dealt with similar criticism many times before.

It was a part of the job. Those incapable of magic couldn't help being suspicious of what witches concocted. It was no different from people who couldn't wield a sword calling a swordsman cowardly out of their fear for his skill.

"Then would you hesitate to give a doctor's medicine to a patient on the brink of death who ardently wished to live?"

"Are you comparing yourself to a doctor?"

"In principle, yes. All medicines have effects on the mind and body. Whether they are made by a doctor or a witch."

Confusion distorted Lau's beautiful features once more. Her cheeks twitched as if she was about to cry.

"And to a witch, everyone who comes to their hermitage is a very wealthy, valued client."

Rose's extra emphasis on *wealthy* earned a small giggle from Lau that turned into a full "Ahaha!"

"I see. You value all your clients, then?"

"Yes, I do."

Rose had purposely said it to make her laugh, but she got the feeling Lau was laughing for an entirely different reason.

It was rare for Rose to be so friendly with a client. Her default approach was never to open the door or pull out a chair for them. Lau, however, possessed the kind of charm capable of making others want to do something for her.

After laughing until tears sprung to her eyes, Lau looked down at her hands and confided, "I wanted your potion."

Rose nodded, careful not to miss the emotion behind her confession.

When Lau had denounced the witches' secret potions, it wasn't the witch or the potion that she rejected, but the human heart that sought it.

It was nothing new for clients to speak about themselves that way.

“I am to marry in the near future. Marry off into a far, far, faraway place. I may never again be able to set foot on this land—this land I have always loved and protected—again!”

Her voice embodied all the raging emotions that were bottled up in her chest. Lau paused, seeming to regain control of her rampaging feelings, and fixed her tone.

“I was prepared to someday marry to my family’s advantage. But I have been naive in my estimation of some things. Such as how important it would be for me to be able to give my entire self away.”

“...Would you like me to listen?”

“Yes, please do. I think I have always wanted to tell someone.”

The girl’s tightly clasped hands hadn’t even developed a woman’s suppleness yet. Rose took off her robe and gently draped it over Lau.

“I am to marry a widowed man forty years my senior. Oh, do remember that this is terribly confidential. Four heads will fly if anyone discovered I knew this.”

Had she relaxed enough to joke around? Lau gave a toothy grin.

“...Even if I act prepared for it, I get cold feet whenever I imagine what my life will be like there. Since I can’t bring my loved ones or friends along, I wanted to take something I could rely upon. Yes, you guessed it. What I wanted, Witch, was a certain potion you make...”

The love potion.

Rose blinked once at the words spelled by the lady’s coral lips. The love potion had always been in high demand, though she seemed especially fated to make it as of late.

“With your great beauty, Lady Lau, I fear the potion will be overshadowed.”

“Oh, I’m not going to use it to ensnare another.”

“You aren’t?”

“I am going to use it...to fall in love.”

“To fall in love?”

“As long as I love that man...I’ll want to do my best no matter what happens there, right? Whatever may happen, whatever is done to me, even if I have no friends, or can’t see my family ever again, I must continue smiling. Loving that man will give me the strength to do so.”

The flames in the fireplace danced in Lau’s wavering eyes.

To think that such a heavy load weighed upon such small shoulders, shoulders that were currently wrapped in Rose’s dirty robe. Rose could only narrow her eyes in response for the young Lau, who had to be married off and sent to a distant land.

“I can offer him my name and my body, but I cannot freely control my heart. Thus, I relied on you, Witch.”

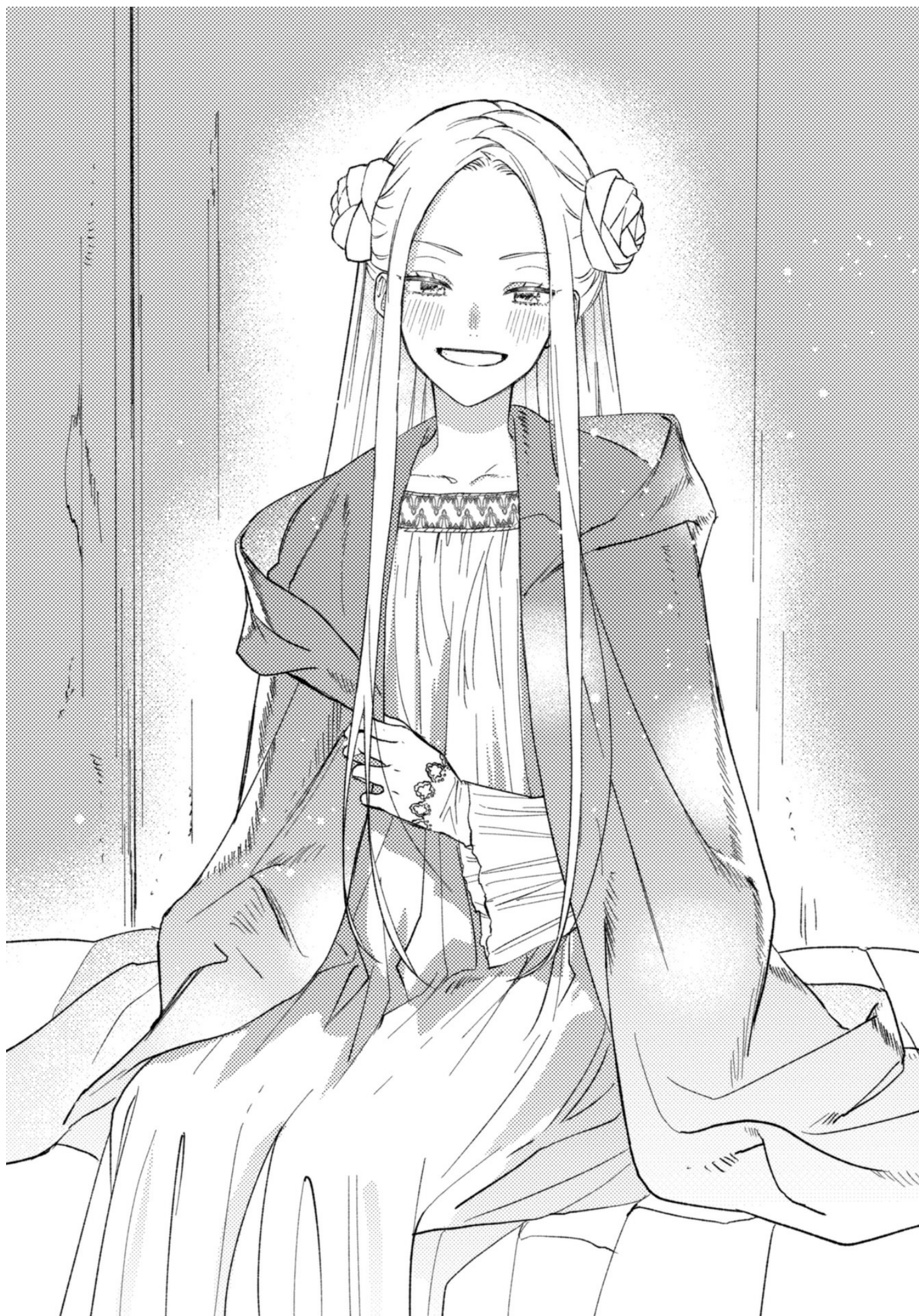
Rose was a witch. Witches did not belong to any country, nor were they baptized into any religion. Therefore, kings and gods held no sway over Rose. It was as if they didn’t even exist in her world.

But now, for the first time, Rose felt as though she saw a glimmer of something akin to those entities. Rose was genuinely proud that Lau relied on her and called the Witch’s secret potion a symbol of hope, when most people scorned its use all the while using it for their own aims.

“...I’m honored.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Lau smiled broadly at the words Rose meant from the heart.



“Aaah, I feel so refreshed after talking about it. This is the first time I have openly confided my feelings in someone. It’s also my first time being alone and choosing which path to walk. It was all so new to me this afternoon that I spaced out for a while pondering it, and then night had fallen before I knew it.”

Lau smiled as if she had taken her first breath of fresh air in a long time. She had lived the complete opposite lifestyle from Rose, who did everything alone and always made her own decisions.

But Rose had heard too much about Lau’s circumstances to ever envy her lifestyle.

Rose was heading to the kitchen to make some tea when she heard the bell announce another visitor.

Another one? Today is unusually busy.

She peered into the dark forest through the window. Fortunately, the visitor came with a lantern, immediately giving away their identity.

“Lady Lau, it seems a regular client has stopped by. Please wait here while I go turn them away.”

“One of your regulars? All right,” Lau said without any fuss.

Rose left her on the bed and closed the front door behind her. Then she headed to the boat with a lantern. She affixed the lantern to the bow and rowed to the other shore with familiar ease.

Noticing her from the forest, Harij waved his arms in large arcs over his head.

“Rose! You came at just the right time. I didn’t know what to do without the boat—”

“Please calm down. I apologize, but today—”

“Sorry, but this is an urgent matter. Is there a spell or potion to locate something that’s missing? If you don’t have the right tools or ingredients, I will immediately go—” Harij, who continued to talk over Rose after confusing her with his sudden dead-of-the-night visit, suddenly stopped midsentence.

What in the world is it this time? She followed his gaze to her opened front

door.

“Hi!”

The girl stood alone in the garden, illuminated by the faint light spilling from the hermitage. She waved both hands at them while her robe fluttered.

“...Princess Billaura!” Through Harij’s tightly grit teeth slipped out a frustrated sigh and a name Rose should not have heard.

It didn’t matter that Rose wasn’t associated with any kingdom. With the royal capital built right next to the forest where she lived, she was bound to know the names of *her neighbors—especially when they were royalty*.

“...About that spell to help you find what you are looking for—”

“Sorry. I don’t need it anymore.”

Looks like it. Rose kept her comment to herself.

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LAU—or Billaura—spoke of wanting a love potion, but she didn’t try to place a new order for one. Moreover, the fastidious and straitlaced Harij had ventured out to buy a dubious witch’s potion because someone he couldn’t refuse had requested it of him.

Rose made it a principle not to pry into her clients’ lives, but she couldn’t prevent information from leaking to her.

“Why are you here...? How in the blue blazes did you manage to make it this far alone?”

Watching how infuriated Harij was with Billaura made Rose vow to never anger the man. He was so furious he didn’t even notice the room was ten times messier than usual. A vein jumped in his temple as he tried to maintain his composure in front of Lau, who sat elegantly on the bed.

“Are you aware of the uproar you caused in the palace? Just how many people do you think are out tearing up the world searching for you...?” Harij’s voice, trembling with anger, abruptly stopped.

Feeling that it would be wrong to stare, Rose had kept her gaze trained on the

fireplace, until the sudden silence made her look back at them. They were facing each other in a seemingly endless staring contest. Neither of them said anything. The flickering and crackling fire illuminated their cheeks. Even their shadows on the wall were facing each other.

Lau let some of the tension out of her shoulders and laughed at Harij's menacing face, which was too scary for a normal person to look at directly.

"I know, I know. Forgive me."

Rose thought Lau's practiced smile didn't suit her age. Though it seemed to suggest Lau had given up on everything and pleaded for forgiveness, it also hid the knowledge that she would be forgiven for anything she did.

She spoke in a lofty manner that offered neither an excuse nor any real apology. Whether Lau's behavior defanged him or he had finally cooled down, Harij knelt before her with an embittered frown.

"I was out of line. I deeply apologize for my outburst and for not being there to protect you... I'm glad you are safe."

Lau gave a big nod and accepted his apology laced with great regret.

"Sorry for the trouble."

"Everyone is worried sick. I humbly request you remember those admirable words until you return to your chambers."

"Don't fret. I'll go home now."

Lau cheerfully laughed off his concerns and ruffled the hair on top of Harij's bowed head. Profound affection and trust could be seen in the way she patted him like a race horse that had finished first.

"Witch, I regret that my stay was accompanied by such commotion."

"...Please stay for tea next time."

There probably wouldn't be a next time for Lau, who was about to marry into another kingdom.

Rose still wanted the girl who found hope in the Witch's secret potions to come make another request any time she liked. She wouldn't even mind if she

just came to spread her wings for a bit without ordering anything. Though she knew Lau wasn't in a position to do so.

Picking up on Rose's feelings, Lau smiled.

"I would love to relax over a cup of tea with you. All right...it's time for me to go." The moment Lau rose, she seemed to shine more radiantly than the fire. She had shed her "noblewoman" charade and returned to her true identity—the princess.

The sudden powerful aura she exuded stung Rose's eyes. Blinking, Rose cast down her gaze to where Lau's feet were. There, the princess's exposed skin touched the dusty floor after having cast off her muddy slippers.

"Please wait where you are," Rose requested, then murmured to herself, "I'm positive I have a pair over here..." as she dug through a mountain of clutter. The mountain collapsed in an avalanche of noisy bangs and crashes.

Harij quietly scowled as he finally noticed the room was messier than any existing words could describe.

"Found it."

Rose had pulled an object wrapped in a jute bag from under the mountain. She shook off a thin layer of dust and pulled open the strings. Inside was a pair of boots. Tien had said they were special boots made from the leather of an adorable, huggable, round creature that lived to the far north called a seal. He bought them as a souvenir for her when he traveled to the northern countries. Rose had yet to wear them since her current boots hadn't worn out. She couldn't very well make the princess put those filthy, soaked slippers back on, so she checked to make sure there wasn't any mold growing on the boots before holding them out to Lau.

Lau was an excellent customer Rose had already received a large sum of money from, and when all was said and done, Rose was the "Good Witch of the Lake."

"At night, the forest is a dark and dangerous place."

"I will gratefully accept your kind gesture."

Rose wrapped hand towels around each of Lau's feet and slid the boots up her legs. She tied the strings so they wouldn't come undone along the way. The simple, unadorned seal boots seemed unworthy of the princess's feet, even just for a walk to the palace. But they were more than capable of protecting her from the frigid winter night.

"Until next time."

Surely it was just Rose's hopeful imagination that made it look as if Lau's elegantly shaped lips curved into a bashful smile.

Harij followed closely behind Lau as she walked to the dock. He stopped as he passed Rose and brought his lips to her ear.

"Sorry about the inconvenience she caused you. I promise to make it up to you..."

Darn it! Don't get so close to me! Frustrated by how cruelly beautiful he was even in the dark of night, Rose covered the ear his breath tickled.

Harij cocked an eyebrow at her, his hair still a ruffled mess from when Lau ran her fingers through it. Annoyance surged through her.

He's always so arrogant on a daily basis that it's frustrating, but when it comes to the princess, he does a one-eighty and humbles himself before her! How many bloody times has he said "Sorry" to me today alone? Everything is all entirely, one hundred percent Harij's fault for coming to see me almost every day!

Rose had fallen under a stupid misunderstanding, thinking she knew almost everything about him. Her heart ached as if it were being torn to a million pieces every time she witnessed a side of him that she didn't know or when he showed off the life and bonds he had formed outside her knowledge. It frustrated her so much she couldn't stand it.

Every time, it forcefully reminded her that he was so utterly out of her league.

"Should I expedite your second order?" she whispered, quietly enough that it wouldn't reach Lau.

"What?"

“Don’t you need it before Lady Lau’s marriage?”

“Huh?”

Ugh, just stop. Rose cursed herself.

Prying into a client’s personal circumstances went against the witches’ creed. She was horribly ashamed of the unseemly words that emerged out of her jealousy.

Knowing she was saying dumb things did nothing to stop her mouth from running wild.

“Do I have to spell it out for you? Didn’t you order that potion to make it so Lady Lau won’t forget you after her marriage—”

“You’re mistaken.”

“Oh dear, then are you planning to force her to elope with y—”

“I said you’re mistaken.”

Harij grabbed Rose’s face with one hand. Suddenly, both of her cheeks were being squeezed together by his fingers, causing her lips to puff out like a fish. She was relieved to the point of tears that he’d put an end to her pointless rambling. Now she didn’t have to continue saying stupid things.

If she had been like a cat ready to scratch a moment ago, she was now more like a cat that had been picked up by its scruff. Harij removed his hand from her face, grabbed her hood, and pulled it down past her chin.

“You don’t usually ask questions like that.”

Her heart sank. She was scared to death she had disappointed him.

Rose was a witch. She was more frightened that he would think less of her abilities as a witch than that he might deny any other aspect of her identity.

Harij, however, smiled away her worries. Had the spot where he grabbed her cheeks turned red? He stroked the area with the side of his hand. A different kind of chill tingled her spine.

“Anyway, I’ll be back soon.”

No sooner did he finish speaking than he hurried to Lau’s side.

Lau flashed a knowing smile from where she watched over them interacting from a distance.

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“...**YOU** are back already?”

“I told you I would be back soon.”

Sullenly standing in her doorway was Harij, who had just finished escorting Lau home. Not much time had elapsed since he left. While nighttime clients weren't all that unusual, she was definitely surprised by this one.

The “soon” part of his “I'll be back soon” was quite literally too soon. Rose balked because she thought he was being figurative, not literal.

Did some sort of very urgent business come up? He always visits during the afternoon lately, and there's still quite a distance between the palace and this island.

“What of Lady Lau—”

“I escorted her home. I'm not the only knight at the palace. I left her in my colleagues' care. Anyway, I wanted to apologize for the trouble she caused you first. Thanks for looking after her. You have my heartfelt gratitude.”

“No need for thanks. I treated her as the valued client that she is.”

“I'm sorry and thank you. I highly doubt she will sneak out of the palace again... Actually, she has never once acted out like this before.”

Was that why Harij was in such a panic to find her? Rose had once heard that the better behaved a person is normally, the more likely they are to make wild snap decisions. No one could have predicted that the well-behaved princess would sneak out of the palace right under the guards' noses. The palace must have been turned upside down in the ensuing chaos.

“Anyway, are you planning to go somewhere at this late hour?”

His question reminded Rose, who stood there staring up at him, how she was dressed. She was all bundled up like a polar bear to withstand the cold of the nighttime forest.

“Yes, I am. I was about to visit the lake...”

“In the middle of the night?” Harij skeptically dropped his gaze to Rose’s feet. Finding that strange, Rose also looked down at her feet. “...I see you have another pair of boots.”

“Those *were* my other pair. And that is quite a rude thing to say.”

“Can you blame me for wondering? Last time, you didn’t have clothes—”

“Don’t bring that up ...!”

She instantly recalled her blunder—bathing in the lake without knowing Harij was present the entire time. Blushing, Rose’s lips quivered with the rest of what she didn’t want to say.

“Okay, okay. I normally don’t think about it. But I was in such a rush I forgot to bring back the boots she borrowed from you. Won’t you be cold with just one pair?”

Harij’s concern for her—especially regarding her attire—further fueled Rose’s shame.

“You needn’t concern yourself with me. I at least have someone in my life who sends me clothes,” she asserted strongly, becoming upset with him.

She had become far too straightforward with him ever since the love potion incident. In front of Harij, she could no longer maintain her cool facade.

Of course, Tien was the person who sent her things. It was safe to say that Rose had no other close friends aside from him. He was a traveling merchant, which made it difficult for him to stop by her place sometimes, but he always sent Rose what she needed whenever she wrote him.

“...Were those clothes and shoes sent to you, too?”

Harij’s friendlier manner had disappeared, only to be replaced with a scowl.

His sudden change flustered her. Harij never seemed like the kind of man to lose his temper over Rose standing up to him. Or was it not the way she said it, but the way she obtained the items that upset him?

I haven’t done anything illegal. I think. Most likely. Probably.

“The seal boots I gave Lady Lau were indeed sent to me. What of it?”

“You said you gave them to her, yeah? Then we will take ownership of them.”

“Uh, okay. I guess you can...go right ahead.”

From the beginning, Rose had given away the boots to protect the princess's feet. She didn't regret that decision, but she also didn't like the brusque way Harij was commandeering what she'd intended as a gift.

The sour-faced knight seemed as if he had nothing more to say, so Rose pointed at the darkness outside, desperate to redirect the conversation.

“So, um...would you like to come with me?”

Harij nodded, the lit lantern still clutched in his hand.

Rose brought Harij with her and set out by boat on the lake. The completely flat water surrounded by towering trees looked blacker than an inkwell. Harij probably couldn't tell where the boat was right now. Rose had him sit, saying she would row instead, and she stood with the oars. The oars smoothly scooped through the water, taking the boat to its destination.

“This is it.”

“What's...” Harij trailed off before he could finish asking “What's here?”

The moon had poked out from behind the thick cloud cover, shining brilliantly in the sky and the lake. Its light formed a path on the water's surface that swayed with the ripples from the boat. The dinghy stayed perfectly on the moonlit path and stopped dead center of the moon's reflection. Rose pulled a tiny bottle from her pocket, reached over the side of the boat, and scooped up the moon.

“This is one of the love potion ingredients. It's a trade secret, so please keep what you see tonight to yourself,” Rose whispered in a voice meant for his ears only. The moonlight she captured in the bottle still twinkled as if it were in the sky. “Beautiful, isn't it?” she hummed, entranced.

Moonlight was the prettiest of all the strange ingredients that went into a witch's potions. She brought the bottle close to her face and gazed upon its beauty. The bottled moonlight illuminated her cheeks.

Harij nodded, his eyes on her. "...It is."

Thrilled he agreed, Rose softly chuckled in the middle of the dark lake.

After returning to the hermitage, Rose immediately set about extracting the moonlight from the water. Freshness was key. She didn't have time to deal with Harij.

As she stirred the cauldron, she felt an intent stare on her back. She tried to ignore it and keep stirring, but it was hard to pretend she didn't notice anymore.

"Please don't stare at me so much. My hands might slip."

She hated herself for being unable to tell him to "go home." Rose was a witch. Witches couldn't say what they didn't mean.

Apparently sensing how serious she was, Harij quietly averted his gaze. Not that it did her any good—Rose was too unnerved by the silence that followed that she started talking again.

"The quiet makes me nervous. Please talk about something."

"You're more finicky than I gave you credit for."

She didn't let disappointment about his new opinion of her show on her face. Rose stirred the cauldron until the liquid swirled on its own, and spun the floating light onto the spindle. She stretched out her arm and twirled the spindle until the clump of light thinned, and then she scooped out more and repeated the process.

"...I've never seen a witch's magic before."

"There is nothing to gain from showing it off," Rose answered, not looking at the man who did as she asked but called her finicky.

"...I see. By the way, can you tell when you have a visitor, Rose?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you're always peeking out the window."

"You noticed?"

"Hard not to."

The moonlight was being spun into a thin thread of light. Rose skillfully coiled the light around the spindle before it could tangle around her hands.

“You have good eyes... One of my ancestors cast a spell on the bell tied to the forest dock’s pillar to make it ring whenever someone approaches. Sometimes beasts roaming the area will set it off by accident, too.”

“...I see. So am I right to assume that it’s thanks to the warning sound from that bell that you were able to hide from the suspicious people you mentioned before?”

“.....”

“...Rose. Are you listening?”

“Sorry. You are distracting me from my work. Please don’t talk to me.”

“Hey. You’re the one who said to talk...,” Harij grumbled.

Rose concentrated on her hands, pretending not to hear him. In the end, she couldn’t answer him until after she finished her work.

“...Sorry, what were we discussing?”

Rose tilted the spindle over a big glass bottle, pouring in the fine thread made of moonlight as she faced Harij. He watched her with exasperation from where he sat on the chair he had carried over to her workbench.

“...You just reminded me that you live in your own little world. Thanks.”

“You are very welcome.”

“...So what time does the bell stop ringing at?”

“What do you mean, *stop*?”

“...Don’t tell me it rings even this late at night?”

“Asks the client who has stayed until this late hour.”

It was Rose’s turn to be exasperated with him.

I have no idea what business has kept him here this late, but it’s surprisingly dark out. The day must have changed by now.

“Morning, afternoon, night, it rings, regardless of the time. Besides, most

people visit witches at night, so I have trained myself to wake up at the drop of a pin. I am the last witch living in these parts, after all.”

Harij looked uncomfortable after being called out for staying past dark. But the more he heard from her, the harder his expression became.

“So you have been neglecting sleep for years?”

“I sleep. I just sleep light.”

“That’s the same thing as barely getting any decent sleep.” Harij stood up in a rush, noisily knocking back the chair. This was the first time the man who always behaved like a nobleman had made such an ill-mannered gesture as scraping his chair across the floor. He captured her hand while she was still processing his unusual behavior. His large palm pulled Rose by her slender, branch-like wrist.

The Witch’s hermitage was compact. The space wasn’t separated by doors, and her bedroom consisted of just a small bed hidden behind a partitioning screen.

He scooped her up since she refused to budge and carried her to the bed where she had Lau sit earlier that evening. Then he gruffly dropped her on top of it like a sack of wheat. Rose tried to push herself upright but was prevented by Harij trapping her beneath him.

“Sleep.”

“Wha—”

His command froze her in place. She couldn’t push herself up on her elbows with him hovering above her, pinning her between his knees.

“Go to sleep.”

Rose’s head spun out of control from Harij’s unexpected actions and the unbelievable position they were locked in together.

“You dare to handle potions that can become poisons with such a slender body without much sleep or food in your system...?”

Since her grandmother’s death, Rose had barely interacted with anyone—it had been a long time since someone had given her candid criticism. Even Tien,

the last person she thought of like family, generally let her do as she pleased and didn't nag her about her lifestyle choices.

Rose darted her eyes away from the argument coming from directly above her. Glaring sternly down at her, Harij closed the distance between them until their foreheads nearly touched.

"But...that's not...fair... Your lifestyle as a knight is—"

"Knights take shifts. We have breaks and days off. But there is only one of you..." Harij paused. It seemed to finally dawn on him what kind of position they were in right now.

Up close, Rose watched his eyes slowly widen. She was reflected in those eyes framed by long eyelashes.

There, a witch with pale-pink hair stared up, her own eyes misting in surprise and confusion, her lips trembling.

"....."

"....."

They both held the silence, which seemed like the wisest decision at the moment.

After a few long seconds, Harij withdrew from her with great care. He moved so cautiously as if even the slightest shift in his balance would bring about the end of the world.

He lowered his legs, which had pinned Rose to the top of the bed, to the ground. Confirming they had safely dodged the end of the world, they exhaled in unison.

"...I know this won't sound very convincing right now, but I would never take advantage of a sleeping woman. You have my oath," Harij vowed meekly.

Rose bobbed her head like a broken doll. "...I know. I'm not worried."

Harij's temple twitched, but he seemed mostly satisfied by her response.

"Sleep, then. The bell will ring if you have a visitor, right? I'll fetch them with the boat if I hear it. Don't worry."

There was too much for her to worry about. Like how could she be so rude as to sleep in front of him? She couldn't let him spoil her like that after how tired he must be with everything that happened with Lau that day. Most of all, relying on him again for something like this would make the nights she spent alone that much harder.

"Don't think about anything. Just get some restful sleep."

His gentle voice sunk in and spread through her, soothing her eyelids into closing. Unable to resist the security she felt with him there, Rose drifted off into dreamland.

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I slept like a log. I slept so much I feel like an idiot.

Rose awoke the next morning holding her head. Drool dribbled down the corner of her mouth. Outside the window, a bird chirped and playfully flapped its wings.

Chirp, chirp! Chirp, chirp! It sang at the top of its lungs despite the ungodly hour.

STOP CHIRPING, ANNOYING BIRD!

Although she woke up in the worst mood, her body was in peak condition. She hadn't felt this good in ages. Her joints were loose and her head clear. Perhaps she had long since passed her physical limit without realizing it.

She didn't want to know she could become so weak. Determined to always be strong, Rose exhaled her woe into her pillow.

"You're awake?"

"Yes, sir!"

Harij spoke to her from the other side of the partition. She trembled with fright.

How could I take advantage of his kindness and fall asleep in front of him like this?! I didn't snore, did I?

All sorts of worries plagued her, but she didn't have the courage to ask.

“Mm...sorry...for the...trouble...”

“I can’t understand you when you mumble. Take your time washing up before you come out here.”

Witches didn’t dress up like fancy ladies, but she checked her face in the magic mirror randomly placed beside her bed. After wiping her crusty eyes and her drool, she combed her hair with her fingers.

She poked her head around the partition. Her nose twitched. She didn’t have to move to catch a whiff of the delicious smell filling this house for the first time.

“If you’re up, take a seat.”

“Mm-kay.”

Rose sprinted over to the table like a grunt soldier taking orders from their commanding officer. The mess cluttering the table had been neatly moved aside and arranged on the floor. A path to walk and a space to eat had been cleared.

What magic took place over a single night? she wondered as she nervously sat down. A plate of sandwiches was placed on the table in front of her. Rose gasped.

“What the— I mean, what is this?”

“I baked a fish I caught in the lake with the leftover apple butter and placed it between two slices of bread that I brought. Was it okay to use the lettuce that had been chilled in the lake? I also used some parsley from the garden and the salt and spices in those bottles over there. I watered the garden as well. More importantly, I noticed that the bread I’ve brought you hasn’t depleted much. Are you actually eating when I’m not around?”

Rose nodded her head up and down like a broken doll since she wasn’t sure where to start with her reply. She didn’t know there was fishing equipment in her house, or that Harij was good at fishing, or that he was keeping stock of her food.

Still not processing the situation, Rose partially spaced out, murmuring aloud,

“Looks yummy... This breakfast...is it even real...?”

The smell of breakfast and the Witch’s hermitage blended together.

“It’s almost as if...Grandma is still here...”

“Huh?”

Harij turned his astonished eyes on her. She quickly shook her head.

It almost felt as if she had returned to the days when her grandma was alive. Back to the days when she had sat around the warm breakfast table bathed in morning sunlight with the little birds that came to sing and play. A much younger Rose always sat at the table sleepily rubbing her eyes. She sipped her grandma’s homemade soup while the older woman nagged her for not combing out her hair first.

For years, she couldn’t remember those sweet moments in time. The actions of a single person restarted the heart she had left frozen since then. Though she knew she would surely regret it later, Harij made her the happiest she had ever felt.

“Thank you very much. I slept well. And you even made me breakfast...”

He placed a cup by her hand before she could finish speaking. The tea he brewed had a similar fragrance to the one Rose always made.

Did he brew it while recalling my song? I’m so happy I could cry.

“I’m going to enjoy every last drop and bite...”

“Go right ahead.”

Harij sat across from her, cup in hand.

Before she even took her first bite, Rose knew this was going to be the best breakfast of her life.

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AFTER tidying up breakfast, Rose immediately got to work on the potion. She pretended with all her might not to notice how much more her heart ached this time compared with the first. She carefully extracted the remainder of the mixture she made previously, then poured in the moonlight—the final

ingredient.

Light flashed before it waned. The Witch's secret potion was finished.

"Please take it. This is the love potion you ordered."

Stunned, Harij stared dumbly at the freshly brewed potion Rose held out to him.

"...Uh, wasn't that too fast?"

"I created a surplus of the mixture during your last order. All I had left to do was the finishing touches."

Harij had a difficult expression on his face that seemed to say he accepted yet also didn't accept her explanation.

"Most of the ingredients were ones you collected for me last time, Mr. Client, so you needn't pay me. I am indebted to you for all you have been doing for me. This makes us even."

"I looked out for you because I felt like it. I'll pay for it—is what I'd like to say, but I don't have the money on me right now."

"I'm aware of that."

"To make matters worse, the princess's bridal procession was moved up because of what happened last night. I will be out of town escorting her to the border next week."

"Oh, then I finished the potion just in time for you. You really needn't trouble yourself over the payment." Rose shoved the potion into his hand, insisting he take it home with him. Harij gave her an incredulous look.

"Has anyone ever told you that you are coldhearted...?"

Witches didn't interact with others enough for them to ever form an opinion. They neither met up with nor conversed with their clients more than the job required. Thus, there was no foundation for which they could be called coldhearted.

Last time, when she gave him the potion, she strongly believed their time together had reached a definite end. Yet the opposite happened—for some

reason, they were once more spending idyllic days together sharing meals at the same table. She didn't want to be apart from him. She didn't want to let him go. Stupid as it was, she dreamed these miraculously joyous days would go on forever.

The tablecloth she was able to put away last time might not be so easy to get rid of now. Witches were forbidden such sentiment.

"In my whole life, this is the first time someone has ever said that I'm cold— Give me a moment."

The familiar *ding-a-ling* of the bell stopped Rose from finishing her sentence.

Through the window she spied people in the forest. Two men were talking to each other on the opposite shore.

What's been the deal since yesterday? I'm starting to miss this being such a remote area that I only received a guest once every few months.

"...Those uniforms belong to the City Guard."

Harij peered outside the window behind Rose. She felt his heat against her back, though she pretended not to care.

"What brings them here?"

"I'm not briefed on City Guard matters, but this area isn't a part of their normal patrol, right? If not, this means trouble."

Things just got even more bothersome. No sooner did she think so than she was in for a shock. The men were trying to board the small boat.

"Wh-Why is the boat on that side?!"

"Since you said clients might come in the middle of the night, I sent the boat over with the reel you told me about. I was going to reel it back in before I left."

I wish he hadn't done that! Rose thought in panic. They could have just waited them out if the boat was docked at the island, but now the men were already rowing toward the hermitage.

Rose moved from the window, placed the love potion on top of the workbench, and pulled the rug out from under her bed. Hidden beneath was a

trapdoor leading to the cellar. Too small to legitimately pass for a basement, the cellar was barely wide enough for one, maybe two people to fit. Harij gawped at the cramped space.

Without a second's delay, Rose pushed Harij inside and slid the trapdoor back in place. A barrage of protests came from below. Rose brought her face close to the floorboard and whispered loud enough for him to hear.

"Please don't make a single sound."

Guessing her intentions, he stopped protesting.

What concerned Rose wasn't the potential trouble the two men might bring to her doorstep. Her biggest concern was them discovering Harij inside the witch's hermitage.

No matter what, I mustn't let the City Guard discover him. He's one of the nobles who supports this kingdom and serves as the princess's sword. He's the last person who should be here.

Rose spread the rug over the trapdoor and pulled her hood back up as if nothing had happened. One of the City Guards knocked with the knocker. They had made it across the lake already.

Nervous tension coursing through her, Rose opened the door.

"Hello. Are you a client?"

"Is this the dwelling of the 'Witch of the Lake'?"

"It is. I am the *Good Witch of the Lake*. How may I be of service?"

"Like hell we'd be here for the services of a witch and her ungodly potions."

One of the guards didn't even bother to mask his contempt.

Of the clients who visited the Witch's hermitage, only a small minority tried to curry favor with her—the rest adopted this sort of foul attitude. She was no stranger to being disparaged, but that didn't mean she needed to take it lying down.

"Is that so? Good day to you, then." Hand still on the doorknob, Rose started to shut the door in their faces. The arrogant guard panicked.

“Insolent woman! Do you think you can get away with treating us this way?!”

“I do. For I am a witch.”

Rose was a witch. Saying so wasn’t an act of self-depreciation—it meant she had a firm grasp on her background, rights, and occupation.

A witch was different from a normal person, a witch was different from a country, and a witch was different from the law. Witches had been self-governing, independent beings since ancient times. Nowadays, they didn’t possess the great power they once boasted, but due to their scarce numbers and highly valued skills, they were granted special privileges by the world leaders. That alone evidenced that witches were indispensable to those in power.

A witch’s territory was like international waters where, in return for not having any country to protect them or laws to obey, they weren’t liable for anything. Witches lived in a world apart from normal humans.

The reason Rose deemed she had no future with Harij was because she knew they treaded completely different paths in life. They lived in disparate worlds.

“By all means, please leave.”

“Wench! This is what I get for treating you like a woman!”

The guard jammed his foot in the doorway and pushed back against her. In general, the only visitors to the Witch’s hermitage, including servants, were people ingrained with a sense of decorum. So Rose was appalled by the guard’s crude behavior.

“Come on, give the girl a break,” the other guard interjected, either out of pity for the startled witch or fear she might bring out a poison vial to get rid of them. “Pardon his rudeness, Witch of the Lake. We actually have some questions for you.”

“Any questions pertaining to a witch’s knowledge will cost you.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any money on me, so I will limit my questions to another matter. Recently, there have been frequent cases of theft around the capital. Affluent merchants and manors belonging to esteemed lords have fallen

victim as well.”

“...And?”

Did they actually go out of their way to warn me about a thief on the loose? She looked at the two men through the small gap the guard’s foot made.

“Let me get straight to the point: we have received a tip that a man who regularly visits this dwelling fits all the traits of the thief we are looking for.”

“If you say— Wait, what?!” Rose cried out in surprise. She had a hard time processing this unbelievable turn of events. “A man? ...Not me?”

The only man who regularly visited this lake was Harij. But she never imagined they would suspect a knight as straitlaced and upright as Harij of robbery. If they were going to accuse anyone, suspecting the Witch would be the more believable choice.

“I won’t sugarcoat the matter. We have some underlying suspicion that you might be colluding with the thief. Thus, we came to investigate your dwelling.”

Well, I’ll be. Rose blinked several times. Sweat poured down her back like a waterfall.

Tarnishing Harij’s reputation was now the least of her concerns. They might use the Witch’s infamy to cart him off for crimes he didn’t commit.

Of course, Rose didn’t think for a minute that Harij was the thief. The problem was that he was currently in her house—and that Rose couldn’t lie to hide him.

“Witch of the Lake, I need you to understand that we have to protect the people, and that *humans* who violate the law must be punished to do so.”

“I am fully aware of that.”

“Then please cooperate with us.”

Turning away someone who earnestly requested her aid was too difficult for a good witch. When it came down to it, Rose stayed active as a witch because she wanted to help people.

Taking Rose’s meek expression as a sign of consent, the guards pushed the door hard. Still holding the doorknob, Rose lost her balance. The guards shoved

past her as she staggered, barging into her home.

“Please wait. I can’t have you in the house right now.”

“Because you are harboring stolen goods? The heaps and mounds of junk are suspicious.”

“My house is just cluttered.”

“You have far too much stuff for a woman who lives alone. And no woman could stand to live in such a mess.”

You just don’t know how lazy and negligent women can get when they live alone! Rose wanted to yell and teach them a lesson. *You’ll find any house like this when they are preparing for winter or spring! I’m sure of it.*

“Or could it be you don’t want us to come in because you are sheltering a man?”

“There are no...thieves here.”

“I see. Then you also know nothing of the tall young man with ashen hair reported to frequent this cabin?”

She shuddered.

Rose was a witch. Witches couldn’t lie.

A witch who used the lie of magic could not use lies other than magic.

Rose balled her hands into tight fists inside her robe.

No matter how she thought about it or how many different angles she tried to tackle it from, it would be very bad if they discovered Harij here. The City Guards made it clear how people viewed the Witch with their earlier statement: *“Like hell we’d be here for the services of a witch and her ungodly potions.”*

Everyone who used the Witch’s services either came incognito or sent a servant. No doubt they did so because her secret potions were ungodly and using them would mark them as a coward and be a blot on their reputation.

Rose loved Harij.

That was why she wanted him to forever walk where the sun shone.

“Yes, of...c-course n-not.”

Her voice cracked; her throat constricted. Every sound felt as if it were coming down a long tube. The area in front of her turned dark, and her vision started blurring. A dull, sharp pain shot through her heart as if it were being squeezed in a vise.

“I d-don’t...”

Air wheezed through her throat as if her windpipe were being crushed. She gasped for air. She could no longer stand upright and had to place her hand on the wall for support. Dizziness crashed into her. She couldn’t focus her eyes.

“...k-know...”

Pain like no other wrenched the air from her lungs. She couldn’t breathe. Cold sweat drenched her body. A bead of sweat slipped off her chin and splattered onto the floor.

“...a-any—”

“Are you okay?”

The voice she heard through the ringing in her ears caused her to tremble. Air suddenly filled her lungs again. She crouched with a hand pressed against her chest that ached from the sudden exhilaration of Harij’s dashing rescue. He placed his large palm on her back for support, then rubbed with gentle and soothing movements as if petting a cat.

“Don’t force yourself when you’re sick. Go get some rest on the bed in the back.”

Rose shook her head. She didn’t understand what he was saying. Why did he come out? Why didn’t he understand the sacrifice she was making for him? Why was he lying? As she imagined all the worst-case scenarios Harij might find himself in now, tears stung her eyes.

“Don’t cause a scene. Just do as I ask,” Harij whispered in her ear, then scooped her up in his arms to carry her to the bed. She wrapped her numb arms around his neck and frantically shook her head. She trembled from head to toe, lacking the strength to resist him.

“I’m just going to lay you down on the bed.”

She shook her head even harder, wordlessly insisting she didn’t want that.

“Then stay here,” Harij said with a sigh, readjusting the way he held her. Then he sat on a chair and plopped her on his lap.

“Sorry for the wait.”

His strong, pointed voice shook the deathly quiet hovel. Harij had completely dominated the room. The guards were unable to censure the strange man who had suddenly appeared, much less move a muscle to stop him.

“What unit are you with? What are your names and ranks?” Harij grilled the dumbfounded guards like a commanding officer might.

“...Excuse me?”

“I’m still not convinced you are real City Guards. Your lack of manners and your high-handed treatment of a lady makes me suspect you are bandits disguised as guards.”

The guards immediately stood at attention.

“Of course, the lady here, who sincerely tried to treat you with civility, must’ve doubted your intentions as well,” Harij criticized as he rubbed Rose’s back, which he leaned against his chest. “You poor thing. They gave you such a fright you nearly passed out when you are already feeling under the weather.” His coaxing tone was unlike anything she had ever heard before. His mellifluous voice, sweeter than any honey or dessert he had brought her, graced her ears.

Unfortunately, the romantic moment was lost on Rose, who was being treated like the love of his life as question marks flooded the only part of her brain that still worked.

She was gradually able to catch her breath since the moment she stopped lying. Color had returned to her face, hidden deep under her hood. Rose tried to move off his lap, thinking she could sit on her own now, but Harij fastened his arm around her waist and squeezed. That only served to produce even more question marks in her head.

One question mark, two question marks, three question marks... The situation

was so baffling to her that she started counting and arranging question marks in her head like sheep because at least that gave her something to do with her spiraling thoughts.

“We gravely misrepresented ourselves. I humbly apologize. I’m Naja Hasara, Sixth Patrol Unit with the Arnab Salihafa Guards.”

“I’m Kaph Bizele with the same unit.”

“Arnab Salihafa? You’re with Captain Filsuf’s unit, then?”

“Yes, sir!”

The guards instantly changed their tune.

One look at their faces and it was easy to tell they were being overwhelmed by Harij’s noble aura, which couldn’t be hidden—not that he tried. They started addressing him like a superior officer rather than a suspect.

“Captain Filsuf served under my father when he was younger. He has been good to me since I was a boy,” Harij mentioned as if it were of little consequence while he continued to rub soothing circles into Rose’s back. She could do nothing but stay perched on his lap like a porcelain doll.

“...F-Forgive my rudeness for asking, but may I inquire your name, sir?” the politer of the two guards asked in distress, looking as if he had just been handed a death sentence.

“Harij Azm.”

Rose stiffened. How could he carelessly give away his name like that? Harij’s hand slid down her back to help her relax her spine, which had gone rigid from fear and confusion.

“I’m a Royal Knight. I also happen to be a young man with ashen hair.”

The City Guards jumped to full attention and saluted.



“We have made a grave and unpardonable mistake! Forgive us!”

“We didn’t know it was you, Sir Azm, and made a ridiculous assumption we must apologize—”

“I’m not who you should apologize to. You understand what troubles me... don’t you?”

His hand stopped rubbing her back. A frigid aura poured off him that caused even Rose, who was under his protection, to cringe.

“Lady Witch, please forgive all the trouble we have caused you as well!”

“We will take full responsibility for this case and have the accusations dealt with at once!”

The guards managed to bend their rigid bodies into a bow.

It seemed Harij could tell from the way Rose stirred on his lap that she was going to try to say something. He tightened his embrace to quiet her yet again. Thinking it unwise to defy him in this situation, she maintained her silence.

Anyone who looked at them would think they were a loving couple showing off their affection. Rose and Harij were in their own little world together.

The guards looked away. One of the two interrupted the couple’s moment, prepared for death.

“Sorry to impose, Sir Azm, but why are you here—”

“Shut up, you moron!”

“We have to put something in the report.”

“Let’s just make something up! It doesn’t matter that much!”

“I can’t do that!”

The two men would have gladly jumped into the lake if they were ordered to—that was how badly they looked like they wanted to get out of there.

Harij calmly nodded to them.

“I’m a man; she’s a woman. If any further explanation is needed, I will personally discuss it with the captain of the guard.”

The guards clicked their boots together and saluted.

Rose regained her senses after the guards scampered away like terrified rabbits. When she tried to hop off his lap, Harij's arms tightened around her. Trapped, she looked over her shoulder, her pale complexion splotched red.

"What do you think you are doing, Mr. Client?!"

"What does it look like, *darling*?"

Rose was rendered speechless. She didn't expect Harij to take his stupid joke this far.

"You can call me *Harij* again."

Not the least bit put off by Rose's anger, Harij pulled her hood off.

Things hadn't been going as planned for Rose, and there were just too many surprises for her to stay levelheaded.

"Why did you lie like we're a couple?! What's worse is that you even told them your name!"

"I could say the same, Rose. Why did you protect me?"

He suddenly turned so serious, it was hard to believe he was the same man who had been joking around. His sharp, ultramarine-blue eyes pierced Rose. His gaze seemed to criticize her.

Rose cringed. Criticism was the last thing she expected.

"Because...I thought you wouldn't...want others to know that...you were here..."

Keeping Harij hidden was all she could think about.

For her entire life, Rose had run from trouble. Trouble wasn't to be solved, but avoided. It never occurred to her to confront the problem head-on like Harij.

"You had to go so far as telling an untellable lie? A lie you suffered dearly for in the end."

Why did she do that to protect him? There was but one reason in the whole wide world—Harij mattered more than her own life.

Not that she could admit it.

“I didn’t know it would make me sick. That was my first lie ever...”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“Please answer me first. Why did you carelessly come out of hiding after all I went through to conceal you? You even revealed your real name...”

Losing to the intensity with which Rose wanted to get back to her original question, Harij relented and told her the honest truth.

“In ten days, the princess will be married off and sent to a land so far away from here not even the same winds will reach her. I will be relieved of my duties as her exclusive Royal Knight before any weird rumors have the chance to do damage.”

“I’m glad it won’t negatively affect the princess, but...what about you, sir?”

“Me? I’m not a part of her dowry. Once I finish escorting her to the border, I will be instantly dismissed. Her departure was moved up, so it’ll be some time before I’m reinstated to a new post. I’ll be hanging around the palace for a while with nothing to do.”

“Then this is really bad!” Rose roared.

Does this blundering fool even get it?!

“What’s bad?”

“Th-The...r-rumor...y-you and m-me...love...”

“It’s rare for you to get this upset. Show me your face.”

“Don’t screw with me!”

Rose shoved Harij as hard as she could because he grabbed her chin. But her slender arms didn’t even make him flinch. Instead, she lost her balance and slipped off his lap.

“How am I screwing with you?”

Harij caught her before she could fall, but her self-control, pride, love, and everything in this moment were shattered to a million pieces.

She was sad her efforts to protect him were wasted. But she was also unbearably ecstatic he had treated her like a lover, even if it was just to deceive the guards.

The two contradicting feelings raged like an uncontrollable storm inside Rose. Scrambling off his lap, she grabbed the finished love potion and shoved it against his chest.

“Your business is finished once you accept this, right? I don’t need your money. Get out of my sight. You damned giant devil king of bug shit!”

She pushed Harij outside the house and furiously slammed the door shut.

“Leave!”

That was the first time Rose had ever lost her temper in a string of black curses.

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EVEN a boiling kettle that shakes its lid will cool off after a night. People are much the same way. This was especially the case for Rose when a servant came to her dwelling the next day with “food my lord bought on a whim” and the love potion’s fee.

“I will be fired if you don’t accept, miss.”

Rose couldn’t turn him away when he implored her while shaking in his boots. She grudgingly accepted the basket that first day, never expecting it’d start a whole ordeal involving Azm’s servant visiting her hermitage once every two days.

What was even more unbelievable was that the servant said they prepared meals for her at Azm’s mansion every day. And if that wasn’t ridiculous enough, the servant was also strictly ordered to not return until after Rose finished eating.

“...Do you have need of a potion to curse your lord?”

“The sentiment is gift enough.”

After his fourth visit, the servant stopped being terrified of Rose.

According to him, Harij was too busy these days to even sleep because of Princess Billaura's rushed departure. Maybe he visited in the middle of the night that last time because he knew he wouldn't be able to come by again for a while. But looking at it from the viewpoint of the servant who was forced to deliver food to some witch in the place of his lord, he couldn't have been happy about it.

The servant, who always wore a stiffly starched shirt, was a man named Safina. Rose felt really horrible that Safina—who appeared to be in his fifties or older—had to trudge through this remote forest every two days just to deliver her meals.

"If I can't thank you with a curse, then please accept this small token of my gratitude at least. I won't eat until you do."

"I humbly accept your gift."

Rose handed him the "salve that warms you right up if you rub it in your hands." He was delighted when she informed him that once it cooled down, it could be used to deodorize clothing.

"He already paid me for the potion...so why do all this...?" she muttered.

This time, their relationship as client and witch had been completely severed, so why was he still taking care of her?

Rose was simply at a loss, not expecting to be bothered by this phenomenon again.

She tore a big chunk out of the bread with her teeth. Delicious as it was, she felt uncomfortable receiving charity.

"I have served my lord for a long time, but this is the first time he has asked something selfish of his servants." Safina, who delivered meals on behalf of his lord, said so with a smile and without any sign of being inconvenienced.

"Could it be...that you are happy about this, Mr. Safina?"

"Indeed, I am. I may be inconveniencing you in the interim, but surely only until my lord returns. You would make this old man, who derives such enjoyment from serving his lord, very happy if you were to play along with his

lord's whims, Good Witch of the Lake."

She couldn't refuse him once he called her a *good* witch.

"If it were me, I'd curse the rude bastards who rejoiced over my death. Say your prayers and hope that she is, indeed, a good witch."

Since hearing Harij say that one word four years ago, Rose strove to be a good witch.

That single word—a word Harij had likely long since forgotten—stuck with Rose. She even used it as the guiding principle of her life.

Troubled, Rose nibbled on the bread. Did "only until my lord returns" mean that after that, Harij would start bringing her food again? Was he trying to stay on good terms with the Witch in case he had need of her in the future? Even if that were the case, he was going above and beyond in trying to curry her favor. It was almost as if he were trying to become her patron, which did not make her happy.

Pondering and mulling it for hours on end did nothing to enlighten her on what Harij's intentions were. After all, it was impossible to expect Rose, who had rarely connected with people, to understand the heart and mind of another—especially the heart of the person she loved.

As she concentrated on sipping the pea soup Safina brought with the bread, she heard the faint sound of music. The cold winter winds seemed to have carried the sound out to these parts.

"The capital seems livelier than usual today."

"A festival is being held to celebrate Princess Billaure's bridal procession. If you don't have any other plans, why not check out the evening festivities?"

"Are they worthwhile?"

"In my opinion, they are best in the evening."

Trusting Safina's opinion, Rose headed to the capital that night.

This was actually her first time going to a festival. Her grandmother despised crowds and wouldn't take her. Since she started living alone, Rose always missed the opportunity because the timing didn't work out or she lacked the

motivation to go.

So Rose never knew festivals were so gorgeous. The capital was always full of life, but it was even livelier today.

The streets overflowed with people. A lot more pop-up shops lined the streets than usual. Foreign merchants she didn't recognize had set up shop, too. Tien might have also set up somewhere, although locating him would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

The buildings were decorated with colorful streamers and flowers as if they had put on makeup. National flags that were hung out of windows to honor Princess Billaure swayed in the wind.

Flowers overflowed from a canopy wagon bedaubed in bright colors. Girls all dressed up for the occasion carried baskets of flowers from the wagon and sold bouquets to the crowds. People decorated their chest pockets, hats, and outfits with the small bouquets they bought from the girls, adding extra color to the city. Some people linked arms and joined in a celebratory line dance.

The delicious smell of grilled meat filled the air. Tables and chairs had been set up in different rest areas, allowing people to forget the time in good conversation.

"Festivals are amazing..."

Excitement and hot air bore down on her. Just watching all those people was overwhelming. There was no way Rose could enjoy the festivities. She fought against her desire to bolt and popped inside the nearest store, where she bought one large basket.

The basket was woven using fiveleaf vines and it shimmered like glossy candy. She had wanted a new one since a squirrel ate through her last basket.

At first, Rose rejoiced, thinking she had scored a good bargain, but she came to regret it soon after. She should have never bought something so big she would have to hold it against her chest to make it through the crowds. Carrying a big basket made her the perfect target for different merchants to try hawking their wares.

"Madame! Buy these apples for the mister!"

“M-Madame...?!”

Rose was shocked by the way he addressed her. But then she realized that was inevitable considering she was wearing an outdated dress, carried a stuffed basket, and looked worn out from the crowds. She was at an age where she could be someone’s wife. She also heard it was normal for women to already have children by this point in life.

“I won’t buy any unless you make it extremely cheap.”

“O-Okay... Did I say something to anger you...?” The merchant marveled, feeling Rose’s quiet anger. “Our apples are delectable, you know? They last a long time if you leave them outside. How about it? I’ll give you five for this much.”

Rose silently bent down one of the merchant’s fingers.

“Whoa now, lady. That’s way too cheap.”

“May Princess Billaura have a blessed journey.”

“Agh! That’s right. Today is a day of celebration! Dammit! Just take ’em!”

Rose caught the apples he tossed with her basket that was already stuffed with different fabrics and leaves. As she paid for the apples, she noticed a poster on the wall.

“Oh, that?” The merchant followed her gaze while counting the coins. “It’s a wanted poster. The City Guard told me to put it up somewhere easily seen.”

The wanted poster described a thief: “a tall young man with ashen hair.”

As the guards had said the other day, Harij matched the description perfectly.

“Have you seen someone like that, madame?”

I’ve seen a man like that, but not the thief they are looking for.

Unable to tell a lie, Rose corrected him in place of an answer. “...I will have you know that I am unmarried.”

The merchant silently tossed her another apple. Rose caught it with her basket and went on her way.

Drained from lugging the heavy basket around, Rose took a break from the

crowds. She wanted to head home but needed to recoup energy and stamina to make the journey back. Even short walks were like a marathon for the year-round shut-in.

As she stared at the madder-colored sky, she heard loud fanfare from the main street. Excited cheers and thunderous applause followed the sounding of trumpets. All the activity shook the ground. Curious what was starting, Rose turned just her head and was so surprised by what she saw, she nearly tripped.

She hurried back to the main street as fast as her unsteady feet would take her. People were pushing and shoving against each other for a better spot to wave from as they shouted in excitement.

Orchestra members marched in perfect unison at the front of the procession with instruments strapped to their backs. A luxurious coach decorated with flowers followed directly behind them. Princess Billaura was likely sitting inside the golden coach that was taking her to her groom.

Royal Knights, riding gorgeous stallions, trotted alongside the coach.

Rose tried to weave her way through the sea of people, but her big basket hindered her progress. Even worse, she found herself being pushed back by people who were saying the basket was in their way. The wave of people ended up swallowing her and spitting her out behind everyone.

She stretched up on her tippy toes in hopes of seeing the orchestra, but she only glimpsed the feathers sticking out of their hats.

As she wasted time trying to get higher, the flag bearer leading the carriage came into view—the large flag raised high in the air swayed in the wind. Guided by the flag, the royal coach rolled along. The conveyance rode high for all to see within, which let Rose catch sight of Billaura, too.

The curtains, usually closed, were wide-open today. And yet the minimal exposure given for such an important bridal procession seemed to Rose like an attempt at preventing Billaura from running away.

Billaura waved at her people from the tiny coach window.

Rose thought the quirky girl who had shown up at her hermitage wearing slippers was very pretty, but she was gorgeous beyond compare when dressed

as a princess setting out to fulfill her royal duties. The elegant and compassionate princess leaving to get married in a faraway land bestowed the people with her final greeting.

Hands too full to wave, Rose stared at Billaura. As she stood there with a dumb look on her face, one of the knights on horseback vigilantly scanned the area until his eyes found her.

His blue cloak fluttered. Their gazes locked for a fleeting second that was gone in the blink of an eye.

The horse maintained its trot and the knight didn't stop what he was doing, as evidenced by how much farther he had proceeded down the road.

Still, Rose was positive their eyes had met.

His ashen hair was drawn back under the blue hat that matched his cloak. At this distance it was impossible to see what color his eyes were, although she instinctively knew they were ultramarine blue.

He had shed the shabby clothes he wore to disguise himself in the streets. Dressed up for the parade, Harij's knightly appearance was a million times more handsome than she could ever hope for.

"Best to go in the evening, huh?"

Safina must have wanted Rose to see his lord in his hour of triumph. Rose went weak in the knees and crouched to stop from swooning on the spot.

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THE coach halted at the princess's command. The coachman nervously scanned the area after making the unexpected stop. She had them pause on the outskirts of the royal capital where people were scarce.

Then the coach door opened. A mounting block was placed out for Billaura.

Harij immediately dismounted and offered Billaura his hand. She rested her silk-gloved hand on his palm and glided down. The maids riding with her followed suit. Careful not to let the princess escape, they gathered tightly around her.

Laughing dryly at their wariness, Billaura pinched the sides of her gown so she

wouldn't tread on it as she faced the forest and dropped into a graceful curtsy.

The members of her procession grew tense, wondering whose noble presence they were in. No one appeared from the woods, however.

After all, housed deep within the forest she stared at was only the Witch's hermitage, emitting plumes of smoke from its chimney.

Only Harij understood the meaning of her curtsy.

"Sorry for the delay. Let's go," the princess commanded, lingering regrets washed clean off her face.

Once she was on board, the coach began to move again. The wheels that had started to turn would never stop again.

Chapter 6: The Eventful Night and the Witch **ROSE** had a hard time enjoying her free time now that Harij was gone. Especially during the winter, when there was less work in the fields and fewer potions to make. There were other things she needed to take care of to replenish her magic ingredients while the animals and plants hibernated, but she wasn't motivated to do any of it. The less occupied her hands were, the more time she had to think. Every time the memory of the ashen-haired man crept into her thoughts, she banged her head against the wall to repel them.

It didn't help that she was practically forced to think of him when Safina brought her food once every two days. Even more ridiculous was the anticipation that filled her heart every time she heard the bell ring. *Maybe the actual person came today instead...*, she would think hopefully.

"Who knew love makes you so weak? No wonder people want to use love potions," Rose grumbled to herself.

In her current state, Rose was liable to willingly accept any unreasonable demands Harij might make of her.

Surely she could forget all about this odd blip in time once Harij returned and she could thank and bid him and Safina farewell for good. That was her only hope to regain some semblance of her former self.

How she longed to peacefully fade into obscurity within the lake's cool depths. Only then would her heart stop being so restless.

Realizing her thoughts had gravitated in a dangerous direction, Rose rushed outside. In winter, the sun stayed up for only a few hours, darkening the world and hearts alike. She had to do something before the doom and gloom thought

process took over!

Blowing on her numb fingers, she raked leaves and branches out of her garden, then roasted some potatoes with them. She stared off into space as she watched the thin coils of smoke billow toward the heavens.

How long did she stay like that for? Noise from the forest finally brought her back to the moment. Curious what was going on, she looked over to see some children playing in the woods.

Her heart sunk when she strained her eyes. They were the same children who had pelted her with mud balls.

A piece of her was impressed by how daring they were to attack a witch like that. Watching them for a bit, she noticed they didn't get too close to the dock. Daring as they were, they still feared the Witch's revenge.

Feeling mischievous, Rose pulled a potato from under the fallen leaves. She held the skewered vegetable up high. The children stopped playing to look at her, then shuffled closer to the shore while keeping a set distance. As much as they wanted the roasted potato, they were afraid to accept it from the Witch.

Rose stood up. The children fled and hid in the forest as if they had just seen a creepy crawly bug. She went to the dock and reeled the boat in. After placing the roasted potatoes on the boat, she returned it to the forest dock.

She watched for a while, but the kids never came near it.

I have to stop fooling around and finish my chores. Rose went back inside the hermitage.

In the evening, she suddenly remembered the potatoes and went out to check on the boat. Every last potato had been taken.

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DING-A-LING.

The long-awaited bell rang exactly one month after Harij had departed.

Rose's eyes snapped open. She woke up with a surprisingly clear mind. Safina had visited her yesterday. He only came by once every two days, so it wasn't him. Besides, Safina never visited at night.

Rose couldn't suppress the excitement in her chest. She threw off her quilt and rolled out of bed. Too excited to put on socks, her bare feet hit the cold floor, which instantly sapped the heat from her soles.

At night in the winter forest, silence fell as if all living things were fast asleep. The dark sky spread above the frosted trees, studded with bright stars. Reflecting those twinkling lights on its inky surface, the lake glittered as if someone had flipped over a treasure chest of jewels. Since a young age, Rose had loved the sky luxuriously decorated by stars and the lake when it was colored pink by the sun at dawn.

She gently slid the curtain over with her fingertip. Someone was standing on the unlit dock. Without candlelight, she could barely make out their blurry shadow concealed beneath heavy, darkly colored winter clothes under the starlight. But Rose recognized that shadowy figure. She was positive it was *him*. After all, the tall, dark silhouette was a near perfect match to the one she always spied through her window.

Rose pressed a hand against her chest. Her heart ached.

She didn't have time to get fed up with herself for being this eager to see him again. Wanting to see his face as soon as possible took precedence. Combing her fingers through her bed hair, she added paper and firewood to the glowing embers in the fireplace. Then she stopped as doubt crept in.

Why didn't he light the lantern?

Harij always brought a lantern with him. One with a thick candle that a nobleman was likely to choose for incognito travel.

Rose glanced out the window again. The person had already boarded the boat. And still there was no lantern lighting the bow.

Did he just forget? Forget the lantern needed to navigate the treacherous forest trails? That logic was so absurd Rose laughed dryly at herself.

Excitement turned to dread. Mayhap he blew out the candle so as not to wake Rose? That was just as ridiculous. He wouldn't have stood on the dock, then.

After all, Harij knew that standing on the dock set off the bell in the Witch's

hermitage.

Rose looked out the window for the third time. The boat was out of sight. It seemed less as if the person had become lost in the dark and more as if they had altered their course to avoid being seen. Whoever it was chose to come ashore explicitly avoiding the dock.

The bad inkling clawing at her chest became a sure feeling. Determining it was an emergency, Rose ran to the shelves where she stored her potions and rummaged hastily through the vials, causing them to clang and clatter.

SHATTER!

Hands trembling from panic and impatience, she accidentally knocked several vials off the shelf. The sound of glass breaking echoed through the dark.

Her spine went ramrod stiff. If they didn't know before, whoever was trying to creep up on the hermitage must have realized the Witch was awake now. Rose had no chance of beating them without the element of surprise on her side. No magic was instantaneous—there were steps to follow to get it to work exactly how she wanted. She couldn't count on having the time to go through those steps or on the intruder to be considerate enough to let her.

Giving up on the offense, Rose rolled up the rug under the bed. She moved the trapdoor aside and hid inside the prayer room. She reached out as far as possible to arrange the rug so that nothing looked out of the ordinary. The more pressured she felt to hurry, the more her trembling fingers fumbled like sausages.

Someone moved around outside the house. Rose gave up on making the rug look perfect and moved the door back into place. Inky darkness enshrouded the cramped cellar space without a thing to sit on. Quieting her breathing, Rose curled up in a ball and hugged herself. The erratic beat of her heart pounded in her ears.

She heard something rattling above her. Wondering what it was, she listened closely and discovered she was vibrating the trapdoor with all her shaking. Realizing how scared she was only furthered fueled her fear.

This wasn't the first time she had been in this situation.

And yet she was more scared than ever before.

Probably because she wanted to cling to life now. All because she longed to eat delicious apples with Harij again.

Rose squeezed her eyes so tight it hurt and put her head between her knees. The doorknob rattled for a few long moments before the door creaked open. It had been unlocked from the outside. That proved it—her visitor was an intruder.

She had allowed a suspicious person to boldly walk in through the front door uninvited—into the Witch’s hermitage, her home, that had been cherished and protected by generations of witches who had grown up there.

Fear, sorrow, and frustration gnawed at her.

Every step the intruder took, the floorboards creaked.

Shuffle. Crrrreeeak. Thud. Crrrreeeak.

She heard the intruder gradually closing in on her location. What in the world could anyone want with this shady and run-down hovel? Rose had no idea.

For some time, the intruder wandered aimlessly around the house. Probably because the lights were off. There was the occasional sound of something being kicked over or knocked down. Each time, the intruder cursed in a low tone. Naturally, Rose didn’t recognize their voice. Every angry utterance and sound reached her under the floorboards.

“Well, damn. The Witch isn’t here. I came all this way to have some fun with her because I heard she’s a young broad.”

Rose didn’t know what kind of *fun* he intended to have with her, but she knew it didn’t mean anything good.

“This place sucks. There ain’t nothin’ worth shit here. They said she sells drugs by the boatload. I expected to hit the jackpot.”

Clanging and clattering followed the man’s frustrated cussing. It sounded as if he was after the proceeds she made off of selling potions. The payment for Harij’s two love potions just so happened to be right under her butt. She had hidden the massive sum of money in the cellar in the same bag she received

it in.

The second she learned she was literally sitting on what he wanted, she shook uncontrollably, because it felt as if she had no way out now. Her shaking knocked loose some of the coins underneath her.

The coins clanged against the floor.

“...Well, that’s a nice surprise.”

Rose clamped her hands over her mouth, otherwise she might make a sound. The man’s voice grew closer. The floorboards cried in protest under his heavy feet.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding?”

From the sound of his voice alone, Rose knew the man was sneering.

Shuffle. Crrrreeeak. Shuffle. Crrrreeeak.

He scuffed his feet slowly over the floorboards, as if enjoying the fact that he had cornered his prey. Trapped prey with nowhere left to go can only tremble until death is upon it. Rose’s shallow breathing filled the tiny cellar. The icy chill under the floor clung to her paper-white skin. Mildew infiltrated her every gasp for air, wreaking havoc on her train of thought.

Shuffle.

The scraping feet stopped...right above her head. Things crashed into the floorboards as he threw stuff around in search of her. The loud smashes shook her head. She barely stopped from jumping. Desperately wanting to scream, she tightly clamped her mouth down.

Rose couldn’t escape from the small cellar, which reeked of fear. Biting back her sobs made her sick to her stomach.

CRASH! CLATTER! BANG!

There was an extraordinarily loud crash that sounded like an overturned toolbox. Rose was shaking out of control. A gasp spilled through her fingers. She dug her fingers into her cheeks to stop another sound from coming out. Rose froze with her eyes bulging.

Was he taking out his anger on her stuff because he didn't know where the cellar door was? Or was he just kicking stuff around to intimidate and frighten her?

Fear consumed her the more she thought about it.

She couldn't stop trembling. Her teeth chattered obnoxiously in her ears. Intent on not alerting him to her exact location, Rose frantically tried to calm down, but her body wouldn't stop shaking.

Then light shone into her dried-out eyes, which bulged with fright. A single ray of illumination flashed overhead. Lamplight filtered through the gaps between the trapdoor and the floorboards.

The rug was thrown aside. She couldn't breathe.

The air felt thin and her head spun.

The trapdoor opened. The light of the lamp was too bright; she wanted to close her eyes. Yet her fear-stricken body refused to listen.

"...Rose."

Tears spilled from her wide eyes. *Why is he here? Why...now?*

Sounds tumbled from her lips. Not even Rose understood what she had said.

"Are you all right?"

Harij's concerned voice and caring expression greeted her on the other side of the light. The door had been completely moved away, and the lamp set to the side.

Her shallow breaths came fast and panicked. Air violently returned to her lungs and painfully coursed through her. Inhaling too much air at once shocked her system. Rapid breathing seized Rose. Her shoulders jerked painfully up and down, as if in a spasm.

I was so scared. So scared. So terribly scared. Horribly scared. Scared to death.

"I'm sorry for being late."

She clung to the hand he reached down to her, and he pulled her up. For some reason, his arm was colder than ice and soaking wet. Harij pulled away at

first but then threw aside the thought and hugged her.

He rubbed soothing circles into her back, calming Rose's labored breathing and violent shakes. Their closeness caused the water to soak through his clothes into Rose's and gradually chill her body. As the wetness spread to her, she felt as if she were being permeated by his feelings.



“Are you hurt?”

Harij’s arms seemed to tremble ever so slightly while they embraced her.

Finally calming her breathing, Rose exerted the utmost effort to force her lips into saying “No.”

All the tightness went out of Harij’s tensed body. He exhaled a loud, tortured sigh.

“What a relief,” he said and hugged her even tighter.

Their embrace lasted for a short moment until he patted her reassuringly on the back and let go.

Rose, however, still clung to Harij’s clothes. Realizing where her hands were, she tried to let go, but as she was still gripped by fear, her hands remained clenched around the fabric. Harij’s big palm encompassed her trembling hand. After he massaged the locked digits for a while, she was finally able to pry them loose.

“I-I’m...s-sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” He gave her a reassuring smile and stood up. Then he swung his leg back.

His bare foot connected with something that launched a few feet into the air. It landed on the floor with a hard thud.

“Oh, my bad. I’m such a klutz, my foot bumped into *this* by accident,” Harij said as if he were reciting a script.

Rose gaped up at him. Harij had *accidentally* bumped into a person. A man with the same build and ashen hair as his. He was definitely the thief the City Guards had mistaken Harij for. The man had fainted, his eyes rolled back into his head.

So were all the loud bangs and crashes she heard from the cellar the sound of Harij taking down the thief? For some reason, the hoe from her garden was on the floor next to the unconscious man.

Something bound the man’s arms to his torso. He had been tightly tied up like

a noblewoman's corset. Harij grabbed the man he had tied so tight there wasn't even space for an ant to crawl through.

"I want to stay here with you, but I have to cart this fiend off first. I'll send Safina right over. Whatever you do, don't open the door for anyone until he arrives."

"B-But it's not like I o-opened the door this time...," Rose objected, wanting to make it clear she wouldn't do something that stupid.

Hearing her unyielding voice drew a small, relieved smile out of Harij rather than anger.

"I see. I'm sorry."

The lamplight cast a gentle glow on his cheeks. His tender smile was breathtaking.

"Okay, I gotta go. Stay warm."

"Oh, right. Why are you wet...?" Rose realized the answer before she finished asking the question. "Don't tell me you swam...across the freezing lake in the middle of winter?"

During the cold winter nights, the lake even froze over sometimes. The unforgiving chill seeped into bones and felt like being bitten by frost. Some of the animals that accidentally slipped into the lake lost their lives.

"I heard glass break even though the hermitage was dark. The boat was taking an unusual course around the lake as well, so it was only natural to think something was up."

The frigid cold should have been eating away at him. Rose pushed Harij to her bed and spread the partition out further than usual.

"You might die, you know?! Please take off your clothes!"

"Rose, wai—"

"Take them off. Now," Rose repeated, leaving no room for negotiation.

After a moment, the sound of disrobing could be heard from the other side. Did Harij decide it was better not to argue with her?

Rose ran around gathering everything that might be useful and tossed different fabrics and a summer comforter she hadn't put away yet over the partition. She was in such a rush she may have stepped on the thief a few times.

"Please wrap yourself in the comforter. Lay your wet clothes over the partition."

She was glad she had stoked the fireplace. The crackling blaze sufficiently warmed the room.

"...You sure are in the way." Rose kicked the thief until he rolled aside. She tugged on the partition to give the bedroom side more space. Now Harij could warm up by the fireplace wrapped in the comforter.

"Rose, kick the thief over—"

"Don't worry about him. I'll pour a sleeping tonic down his throat and sprinkle a paralysis potion on him."

"Th-That works..."

She fetched the potions from the cabinet and, once she did all the necessary steps, dumped them on the unconscious thief. This was the best she could do at the moment. Rendered harmless, the thief laid paralyzed on the floor.

Digging through her closet wouldn't bring her any closer to finding clothes that would fit Harij. She squeezed out the soaked clothes he laid over the partition. If she propped them open so warm air could flow inside, the fireplace's heat should dry them in no time. It had already grown hot enough in the room for Rose's partially wet clothes to dry.

"That reminds me, you aren't wearing your cloak or coat! Where is it?"

"I left what I could on the forest dock."

"I'll go get it! Stay here and keep warm!"

"Rose!"

Rose rushed out of the house, leaving Harij's fairly angry shout behind. The boat wasn't tied up at the dock, as expected. She circled around to the back of the island and found it bobbing slightly offshore. Grateful the waves hadn't taken it out too far, she grabbed one of the oars the thief had dropped on the

island and drew the boat in close with it.

Rose rowed to the forest dock and immediately found the rest of Harij's clothes and sword—even the stunning blue knight's cloak that she adored.

She nearly broke down crying on the spot. She scooped up his belongings with trembling fingers. For some reason, when she clutched them to her chest, a great sense of relief washed over her. Kicking her brain into gear that she had to hurry, she returned to the hermitage hugging his things. Harij met her at the door, already dressed.

“Your clothes...! Are they dry enough?”

“Yeah. Good enough. I'll head out now.”

He was probably worried about leaving the thief in her house for too long. The corners of his lips turned up when he accepted the clothes she held tight to her chest.

“Thanks. You saved me.”

It was Harij who saved Rose. Hot tears stung the back of her eyes.

“Why...?”

Why did you swim across the freezing cold lake to rescue me?

Rose didn't think it was fair to ask him that. After all, she was only saved because he put his life on the line to get to her.

“...Why were you here?” Rose rephrased her question.

Harij had been away from the capital on a mission to escort Princess Billaura to the border. He shouldn't have had any business in these remote woods that required him to be in his knight's attire. Especially not in the middle of the night.

“Were you...tailing the thief?”

Harij shook his head as he fastened on his sword. He made a face as if he had eaten sour candy.

“...I was wondering...what you were up to...,” he murmured uncomfortably.

“...Hmm?”

“I was going to drop by for a bit if the lights were on. I wanted to ask if you had been well...and if you ran into any trouble while I was away...”

Rose stared at him in silent astonishment.

Couldn't he have just asked Safina when he got home? Rose absolutely didn't think that was a justifiable reason to venture deep into the woods in the middle of the night on his way back from a month-long excursion.

“You came...just for that?”

Harij scowled, his mood souring with her reaction. “It was worth it. I'm glad...I came. I better leave now,” he said, sulking, and lifted the thief up like a sack of potatoes.

“Ah, Mr.Client...!”

“What?” He turned a sullen face toward her.

Rose squeezed her hands together and bowed to him.

“Thank you very much...for saving me. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart.”

Harij silently accepted her gratitude, ruffled her hair, and vanished into the darkness of night.

∴ ∴ ∴

“**AZM**, calm down.”

A voice called Harij back to reality. Geones, his fellow knight, grimly watched him.

Like Harij, Geones had just returned from a mission. As one of the officers who lived in the military dormitory, Geones had dropped by the barracks before returning to his quarters, and that was when he spotted Harij carrying in the thief who had been the talk of the town. He was shocked to say the least. The jailhouse was closed at this late hour, so Harij had hauled the thief into the knights' barracks.

“Do I not look calm to you?”

“Sure, you may have been calm on the outside, but you looked like you were

ready to kill him.”

Harij clicked his tongue. If he could’ve killed the man, he would’ve. He despised him enough to do it.

Harij, who had worked without a break for a month, rewarded himself with a visit to the Witch’s hermitage. He was just planning to get a glimpse of her house from the woods.

He never thought he would want to see her this badly after only being apart for a month.

Is she cold? Is she making sure to eat? Does she need any extra help? She hasn’t run into any problems, has she? The cityfolk haven’t done anything mean to her, right? Those ignorant city guards haven’t pestered her again, have they?

He had ordered his trustworthy servant of many years—Safina—to help out Rose the best he could, but he really wanted to be the one to be there for her.

He wanted to cherish and take care of Rose in every way possible.

Was she lonely?

Harij was.

Though he was accompanying Billaura, the girl he protected and cared for like a little sister, on her journey to get married, his thoughts were full of Rose.

He couldn’t forget the moment he saw Rose dressed like the other city girls from his horse. Harij hadn’t expected to see her before he departed, so he felt as if he were walking on air for several days after.

His mind was so full of Rose that even Billaura snickered at him and teased, “You have been afflicted by a sickness not even the Witch’s secret potions can cure.”

At last, Harij understood what affliction she meant. This burning emotion that made one think of another even when they were apart—he knew what thousands, no, *tens* of thousands of people called it.

Harij thought back to the events of the night.

“...Is she already asleep?”

Rose's house sat quietly in the middle of the dark lake.

I'm glad she's getting some rest. I know she's used to nighttime visitors, but I want her to sleep at night.

Harij refrained from walking up to the dock—afraid the bell would wake her. But he soon noticed the boat was gliding across the lake.

"A client...at this hour?"

Conveniently ignoring that he had been just such a customer, Harij was annoyed with whoever it was who dared come at this time. There wasn't a single light on in Rose's house. He had never really paid it any mind before, but Rose was always waiting up with the lights on when Harij came at night. She probably lit the candles to welcome the clients after hearing the dock bell ring.

Even though that was her custom, the Witch's hermitage was still covered in darkness. The boat was also heading to the back of the island for some reason. Harij couldn't pry his eyes away as a gut feeling told him something was amiss.

Then he heard glass break in the distance.

Harij peeled off his boots and heavy outer clothes without a second's delay, as if that sound signaled the start of an urgent race. Stripped down to his pants and thin undershirt, he felt the winter cold sending goose bumps prickling along his skin. He left everything on the shore, including his sword.

He quietly entered the lake so no one would notice. Colder than ice, the water instantly sapped the heat from his body. The bone-chilling cold racked through him, but he swam despite the pain. He approached without making a sound.

The small boat had already landed on the island. No one was on board. As he came up on shore, the chill in the air took what little warmth he had left. Frigid winds blowing over the island from the water mercilessly pounded against his wet body.

He opened and closed his fists several times to warm up. Everything would be pointless if he was rendered immobile during the most crucial moment.

Nothing would be better than if he was just being overly sensitive and

jumping to conclusions. The best-case scenario would be if a sleepy Rose had accidentally broken a glass and her visitor was just someone who didn't know how to row a boat correctly.

He hoped this whole thing could just end with him being a laughingstock for charging head first into a freezing lake.

But...what if something really was out of the ordinary?

"Whenever someone questionable comes by, I immediately hide in the cellar under the floorboards."

Harij gritted his teeth. When Rose first told him that, his initial reaction was pure and simple pity. Since he was brought up believing women should be protected, Rose seemed pitiful for not having anyone to look after her.

But now he highly respected Rose for doing just fine taking care of herself all this time. And he sincerely hoped she would let him be there for her from now on.

He picked up a hoe from the garden on his way to the front door. The door was ajar. A man's voice came from inside.

"Well, damn. The Witch isn't here. I came all the way here to have some fun with her because I heard she's a young broad."

Even though Harij should have been freezing to death, his whole body boiled with anger. He suppressed his rage and hid behind the front door. He looked past the other man's shoulders into the house. Rushing in without a grasp on the situation was the last thing he should do. The man, tall and with ashen hair, was using Rose's old lamp to search the house. His appearance perfectly fit the description of the thief who had been causing trouble before Harij left on his mission. But Harij couldn't take action as a knight until he was positive the man wasn't a client. The place was a mess, but given Rose's normal tendencies, he couldn't pin the blame on the man yet.

Fortunately, he heard the man say, "The Witch isn't here." She must have hidden in the cellar. He pictured her in that cramped space, shivering in fear. Harij clenched his hand around the hoe.

"This place sucks. There ain't nothin' worth shit here. They said she sells drugs

by the boatload. I expected to hit the jackpot.”

Somewhere along the line, the information about her had become distorted. Rose’s potions weren’t the kind of drugs he was looking for.

At any rate, it was clear the man was trying to steal from Rose’s house. Harij decided to speak to the man first, before using physical force. But before he could, the other man said something that caused the vein in Harij’s temple to pulsate.

“...Well, that’s a nice surprise. So this is where you’ve been hiding?”

The man changed directions after hearing something. His gaze shot to the trapdoor, where Rose was likely hiding. The man shuffled forward. His gaze fixed on the rug concealing the door.

The option to speak first was off the table. Before he knew it, Harij was storming the room. By the time the thief realized Harij was coming for him, his mind and body were no longer a part of the waking world. With his last shred of rationality, Harij decided not to use the tip of the hoe, instead ramming the handle into the thief with all his strength.

The man slammed against the wall with a loud bang. Luckily, none of the stuff piled up in that corner of the house broke. Harij was relieved he didn’t damage Rose’s possessions.

Tossing the hoe aside, Harij grabbed the man by his collar and slammed his face into the wall. Once he confirmed the man’s eyes had rolled into his head, Harij tied him up with his belt. He made sure it was extra tight so he couldn’t slip loose.

Silence fell on the room. He searched for accomplices, but the man seemed to be acting alone.

Harij peeled off the rug and opened the door to the cellar. Rose’s deep-green eyes, illuminated by the lamplight, glistened when they found him.

Whenever he remembered Rose’s tears, he wanted to wipe the thief off the face of the planet.

“I’ll watch over him from here. You can’t very well turn over a corpse in the

morning.”

Geones’s voice brought Harij back to the moment.

“Thanks. He’s all yours.”

Harij gratefully accepted his colleague’s generous offer and hastened home. By the time he arrived at his manor, purple clouds covered the sky and the morning sun was rising. The manor was alive with activity despite the early hour since he had sent a messenger ahead of him. Safina, the man in charge of organizing the servants, wasn’t there because he had already headed to Rose’s house per Harij’s orders.

Taking a bath helped Harij feel like himself again. Then he quickly filled his belly with a simple meal.

During that time, Geones thoughtfully sent a messenger with the testimony he extracted from the thief.

Apparently, the thief learned the Witch was a young woman from some small talk he overheard at a tavern. Some of the adults living in the city had found out the Witch was a woman of marriageable age when their kids threw mud balls at her and were chatting about it.

Intrigued, the thief asked them for more details. They happily obliged and told him all about how the Witch sold boatloads of medicine all hours of the day.

It was a well-known secret that the Witch’s customers mostly hailed from the upper class. The thief drew the wicked assumption that he could easily overpower a young woman. Thrilled by the idea of obtaining the Witch’s riches, he immediately began to scout the area around Rose.

Rose rarely ventured outside, and aside from getting visits from a man who delivered her food at the same time once every two days, she practically lived like a retiree. The thief’s plans were ready to be carried out in no time.

The messenger also informed Harij that Geones had handled the paperwork for him to take time off. Harij sent the messenger away with his gratitude and then rang for a servant.

“Safina— isn’t here. Is anyone around?”

One of the footmen silently ran over. He must have jumped out of bed to welcome Harij home. He was desperately trying to pat down a stubborn tuft of bed hair.

“Has the item I ordered before I left arrived?”

“No, my lord. We received word it would take more time.”

Harij sat on the sofa and laced his boots. “Please inform them that I hate to rush them, but the item will be pointless if I don’t have it in time.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Before you go, bring me my pick-me-up bottle off the shelf in my room. And prepare my horse. I’m heading out as soon as I finish my drink.”

As might be expected, swimming in the icy lake after working for a month straight with no break was taking a toll on him. Harij pressed a hand against his brow as he exhaled a strenuous breath.

The footman bowed, his unruly hair sticking up without his hand on it, and quietly left the room with his orders.

Chapter 7: The Witch, the Knight, and the Love Potion

SAFINA rushed to the island, his wrinkled face crumpled with worry, and wept tears of joy for Rose's safety. Rose spent the time since Harij's departure tormented by not having been able to do anything on her own after how much she insisted she would be fine, so when she saw Safina crying for her sake, she finally let go of the self-hate and allowed herself to be grateful she was all right.

Then, with Safina's assistance, she cleaned up the mess the thief made. Once they finished tidying the place, they sat down to enjoy a cup of tea at the table bathed in soft sunlight.

During their pleasant teatime, the bell rang, announcing a visitor.

"He couldn't have come back, right...?"

The color drained from Rose's face, not because she worried the thief had returned, but out of concern for the man she wholeheartedly hoped was getting some much needed rest. She peered out the window and saw exactly who she expected to be there.

But even at this distance, something seemed amiss.

"...Lord Harij? And he even has one of our footmen with him...", a surprised Safina observed through the window with her. "Pardon me, Lady Witch. I shall go out to meet them."

"O-Okay."

Flustered, Safina dashed outside.

At the forest dock, Harij leaned on one of the Azm family servants like a sick person. They must have left the house in a rush, because the servant was still dressed in his indoor uniform.

Rose rummaged through the bottles on the shelf while Safina went by boat to fetch Harij. She carefully picked through the bottles, trying to figure out what was ailing him and why he chose to rely on her instead of a doctor.

“What is the meaning of this?! What in the world happened?!”

“I can never apologize enough! I gave him a different medicine that I mistook for his lordship’s pick-me-up...!”

“I’ve pardoned you for that! That’s enough! Don’t touch me! Go home!”

Things were noisy outside.

Rose couldn’t hear what they were saying, but she was surprised by the urgency and anger in Harij’s voice. This was the first time she heard him shout like that.

She threw open the front door. Safina tumbled into the room together with Harij.

“What happened? What are your symptoms? Call for a doctor!”

Kneeling, Rose examined Harij. Maybe he caught a cold after swimming in the frigid lake. Harij’s face was burning a deep, dark shade of red. His condition was already far beyond what she could treat.

Harij tried to push himself up with his elbows but couldn’t rise to his feet. He clenched his teeth.

“No doctor. Safina, leave.”

“I can’t leave you like this, my lord...!”

“Just go! Lady Witch can cure me!”

“What?” Rose and Safina exchanged looks. “...I can?”

Then his condition was related to a witch’s secret potion. Rose changed her approach.

“You were poisoned, weren’t you? Do you remember the characteristics of the poison? What it tasted, smelled, or looked like? Please tell me everything you remember.”

Harij shook his head, scattering drops of sweat from his drenched forehead.

“It’s a matter of utmost confidentiality. Safina, please take the footman and go.”

Safina had to relent when he discovered the reason for his lord’s stubbornness was due to his work. He knew all too well that Harij wouldn’t back down once he made up his mind. Seeming to decide that leaving his lord to the witch as soon as possible was for the better, Safina quickly stood.

“...As you command, my lord. Lady Witch, please take care of him.”

“I swear upon my life that I will.” Rose looked Safina straight in the eye and gave a firm nod. Even if she didn’t know what poison it was, Rose would never abandon Harij to his fate.

After Safina left the hermitage and returned home with the footman who’d been waiting anxiously outside, Harij collapsed on the floor. He seemed to be in excruciating pain. His breathing came out shallow and rapid.

“I’m going to touch you now.”

Rose ran her hand over Harij’s skin. His whole body jumped at her touch. She instinctively pulled her hand away from the burning heat radiating from him, when Harij caught her wrist.

He moved quicker than she could react. Sweat coated his large palm. His grip was firm enough to crush a rock, but it didn’t hurt. Rose could tell that even in his current chaotic state, he was being careful not to harm her.

“I’m going...crazy... Is there...no antidote?”

His husky, breathless voice was so seductive, it sent shivers down her spine. Sweat trickled down Harij’s chin.

“You know what potion you drank, then?”

“Yeah.”

She heard him loudly swallow.

“Your handmade...love potion.”

She froze for a whole five seconds.

“...Pardon?”

“I accidentally drank the last one I bought from you.”

Accidentally...? Rose was struck speechless. *That’s the last potion you should drink by accident.*

“There is an antidote, but I don’t have the ingredients on hand. How much did you consume?”

“I don’t know. I threw it away as soon as I realized it tasted different from what I normally take. At least a whole gulp.”

“Well, even if you accidentally consumed the whole bottle, the symptoms should subside after half a day of loving someone...”

“You expect me to wait this out for half a day? I can’t survive that long! Besides, I haven’t fallen in love with anyone. I didn’t ingest anyone’s fluids.”

Was he in this much pain because the spell was left incomplete? The surge of magic that lost its destination must’ve been running rampant in his body.

Harij tried to stand up but lost his balance.

“Watch out!”

He slammed into the table on his way down. One of the cups fell off the table in the process.

SHATTER!

The porcelain cup broke with a loud crash.

“Are you all right?!”

Blanching, Rose examined Harij thoroughly to make sure he wasn’t injured. Some tea had spilled on him, but only a small amount that could be easily wiped off. She was relieved he wasn’t hurt.

“Thank goodness you weren’t hurt, Mr. Client—”

“Harij.”

Harij suddenly stood and cupped her cheeks in his palms.

“...Wha?”

Feverish and glistening ultramarine eyes watched Rose. She lacked the

courage to return his gaze, but was also forbidden from turning away.

“...Mr. Cli—”

“Call me Harij.”

Her cheeks went numb under his hands. Harij slowly tilted his neck toward her as she stared dumbly back.

For fraction of a second, Rose couldn't think. Through her wide eyes she watched his stunning face come closer. Her partially open lips were covered—by none other than Harij's other hand.

“.....”

This situation seemed oddly familiar.

When Rose stayed silent, the coarse hand that was acting as the last barrier his self-control could manage gently pulled away from her lips.

“...Things just got worse.”

“...Um, I can see that.”

Harij buried his face in Rose's shoulder, uttering a low growl.

The spilled tea was none other than what Rose had been drinking. Some of it must have gotten in Harij's mouth and eyes when it fell.

Realizing the situation, Rose screamed on the inside. *How could this of all things happen?!* She couldn't stop the cold sweat from coating her back.

“Dammit! ...You managed to get through this?” Harij groaned, pressing a hand to his chest to suppress his roaring heart. Every time he spoke, Rose's shoulders trembled. His feverish breathing caressed her skin through the fabric of her clothes.

Harij seemed to be exerting his utmost strength to control himself—however, the hands touching her were as gentle as ever.

She heard a moan slip through his clenched teeth. Rose stood perfectly still, unable to do anything. She was scared she'd end up stimulating him further.

“I'm sorry. Just for a little bit,” Harij whispered.

“J-Just for a little bit?”

“Yeah, just for a little bit.”

“Just for a little bit,” Rose repeated again, unable to pinpoint exactly what that entailed.

Harij pulled her head to him. He had her hood off before she could blink.

His hands brushed past her ears. His fingers, buried in her hair, stroked her scalp. He ran his fingers through her hair, enjoying the sensation of it tickling his skin. Then, his pinkie finger brushed along her nape. Almost immediately, a tingling sensation coursed through Rose. It was the same sensation she had when she became the love potion’s test subject.

Rose was reveling in the pleasure brought by his hands running through her hair when he suddenly embraced her so tight, it messed up her long tresses. Harij’s lips brushed over her ear, then lingered there longer to enjoy the taste of her. He exhaled a long, breathy sigh and then calmed his breathing.

“...Rose.”

His heady sigh tickled her neck as if begging for a kiss.

His honeyed voice melted her. Her face burned. She had turned bright red, as opposed to Harij, who had regained a healthy color thanks to the magic being completed.

Carefully, Harij separated from Rose. But then, he embraced her again after seeing her flushed cheeks, quivering lips, and shimmering eyes.

“I can’t let go. You’re too cute.”

Oh my god! Rose screamed on the inside.

“You should let go!”

“I can’t... You’re just too cute...”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Oh, how she wished she could faint. God truly had turned a blind eye on the Witch’s hermitage.

“P-Please put a little space between us first, then,” Rose proposed, thinking

he might calm down if they weren't touching. Harij heartlessly rejected her idea.

"Believe me, if I could, I would. I've tried many times and failed."

You drank a love potion, not super glue, Rose retorted in her heart. If he didn't look so serious, she would have said it out loud.

"Forget that. Call me Harij," he whispered in a husky voice, still holding her close.

"Impossible. Never happening."

"Only while the potion is active."

Well, duh. You'll only want me to say your name while under the influence of the potion. Don't make it sound like you're making a great sacrifice with this compromise.

His arrogance was still in full swing even after accidentally ingesting a love potion.

Rose could nitpick in her mind all she wanted, but it didn't matter when she couldn't say a single thing out loud. The warmth of his embrace and the love he was showering her with was wreaking havoc on her heart.

"Please," he breathlessly pleaded, sounding truly fragile.

His weak voice almost convinced Rose that he would die if she didn't utter his name.

Nervous tension stiffened the fingers hugging her. Feeling those hands on her back finally made her give in.

"Okay, Sir Harij, then ..."

"Rose..."

Just when she thought he couldn't hug her any tighter, he knocked his forehead against hers. His joy was transmitted through their intimate touch.

In an instant, Rose's body felt as if it were on fire. The cold blue of his eyes softened into honeyed pools. Unable to withstand his sex appeal nose to nose, Rose squeezed her eyes shut.

“...Rose, that’s dangerous.”

Rose cracked one eye open, unsure of what was so risky about it, and stole a peek at his face. Eyes blazing with passion devoured her. His gaze alone conveyed how badly he wanted Rose.

Harij let out a groan as if he were enduring great anguish while she stared back at him. He licked his lips to distract from his thirst. His tongue moved so seductively across his moistened lips, it gave her delicious chills that made her hair stand on end.

“Please keep your eyes open.”

Right. That’s a good idea. Rose nodded so many times she thought her neck might snap. *But his face is still too close!* She mustered every last fiber of control to avert her gaze.

“I’ll want to pursue you if you flee.”

“Are you trying to kill me here?! What do you want from me, then?!” Crying out, Rose extended both hands to push Harij as far away as possible. But no matter how much she pushed, she barely created a gap between them, because his hands still cupped her cheeks.

Rose was in tears as she tried to pry herself away from him. That’s when she noticed someone outside the window.

Their eyes met. Three children were peeping in through the window. They were the same kids who had thrown mud balls at her and took her roasted potatoes home. It looked as though they had taken the boat out to her island. Safina and the footman had rowed the boat back to the forest side when they left. The children likely only came out to her island because they thought the Witch was alone.

Their little fingers gripped the sides of the window frame so they could pull themselves up on their tiptoes and peep inside. Three sets of eyes bore holes through Rose and Harij.

At Rose’s glance, the children scattered. Regaining her senses after freezing for a whole minute, Rose thrashed around.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?! Stink bug! Piece of crap! Stupid jerk!”

“You’re so cute.”

“I’m not cute, you piece of shit! The children saw us! They are going to spread rumors!”

“Let me take full responsibility for you.”

“You really are stupid! Love potions exist for the sole purpose of stealing such a promise from people of your standing! This potion is used just for that, you fool!”

Rose was so upset she let her foul mouth run wild and true.

Her crush nearly kissed her, called her cute, hugged her, showed off his affections in front of other people, and made her curse like a sailor—Rose just couldn’t keep it in any longer.

“Nnngh... Uwaaaah....”

Before she could stop herself, she broke down sobbing like a child. Tears spilled endlessly from her deep-forest-green eyes.

“Ugh...hiccup...sob...hiccup...”

“Please, I’ll do anything you say. Tell me whatever you wish for—just please, *I beg of you*, stop crying.”

Her tears deeply unsettled Harij. He put his hands on her shoulders and peered into her watery eyes. Rose hiccupped as she cried so hard her nose ran.

“Th-Then...p-please...come back to your...senses...this instant.”

“I’m sane.”

Rose buried her face in both sleeves and wept.

Like hell he’s sane! I’d have an easier time believing a drunk who claimed he wasn’t drunk!

“Then...I-let go...of me...,” Rose sniffled between sobs.

Exhaling loudly, he slowly removed his hands from her shoulders, the lines in his brow deepening—and immediately enveloped Rose in his arms again.

“I can’t. This is as far as I can go.”

“Y-You said anything! You would do anything I asked for, you butthead!”

Rose had never even spoken to her grandmother like this during her rebellious teen phase. And here Harij seemed to find even a crass Rose to be loveable. His finger wiped away the fountain of tears streaming from her eyes due to the ridiculous situation she found herself in.

“Do you truly not want me to touch you?”

Harij knelt and gazed up at Rose. Worry wavered in his ultramarine eyes framed by long eyelashes. Rose could only glower at the man who knew too well how to use his good looks to his advantage.

“You’ve stopped crying?”

“Mr. Client—”

“Harij.”

“S-Sir Harij, I-I won’t stop crying, because you won’t control yourself,” Rose protested through her sniffles.

“If you only knew. There’s so much I would like to do and I’m holding back on all of it.”

“How are you holding back?!”

“I’m restraining myself from asking you to sleep with me like my very life depends on it.”

Harij stared at Rose with a look so dead serious it could kill. His terribly sharp gaze wasn’t from anger or resentment; instead, it held a mysterious quiet.

In the face of this expression that made it seem as if Harij were suppressing bubbling hot magma, Rose stopped breathing. Her legs buckled and she pitched forward. Harij caught her in his arms once more.

“What’s wrong?”

“...My legs gave out.”

A storm was brewing in her heart.

Never in her wildest dreams did Rose imagine a day would come when he would stare at her with such passion burning in his eyes. Even if it was only the potion speaking, his words were far too stimulating for Rose, who had secretly crushed on him for four years.

“Huh? ...I’m sorry. Did I scare you with that comment? I’ll help you sit down.”

Harij sat against the wall while still supporting Rose. He sat her on his thigh and gently pulled her into his chest. Going along with it, Rose leaned against him.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. He slowly stroked her hair as it cascaded down his chest. What Harij was preventing himself from doing surely wasn’t this gentle touch, but something more intimate.

Rose vividly remembered the carnal desires she felt for him after drinking just two drops of the potion. She laid a hand on the area that had ached for him. Harij was wrestling with the love potion’s effects and holding back for her sake. He fought with every fiber of his being to not hurt her.

Bliss filled her very being. Rose had never known such joy before.

Sure, she was startled, confused, and even angry at times, but Rose loved Harij. She loved him on an entirely different level than the feelings the potion temporarily gave him.

Of course she was happy. If this were to be a once in a lifetime event, then she wanted to give in to this euphoria that was more than one woman could handle.

The column of Harij’s throat moved when Rose remained silent with her head down.

“Rose, I’m begging you, please, whatever you do, don’t sleep in front of me,” Harij whispered in a voice so husky, it couldn’t hide his desire.

Rose’s eyes snapped open and she nodded several times. Harij’s chest shook with a wry laugh over how fast she whipped her head up and down.

“Why don’t we talk? Better to have a distraction than just sitting still.”

“Let’s do that.” Rose wholeheartedly agreed.

Gaining a little more control, Rose unconsciously squirmed into a more comfortable sitting position. Harij immediately panicked and locked her in place between his arms.

“...Um?”

“I’m sorry it’s uncomfortable for you. But, I implore you, please sit still.”

For a moment, Rose wondered why he apologized before she realized where she was sitting. No wonder she was uncomfortable—she was sitting on top of his muscular and hard thigh.

“Wh-Wha...”

She had been so out of sorts, she never even noticed where she was. Harij lifted her off his leg before she could fly into another flustered rampage, and switched to sitting cross-legged. He placed her back on his lap before she could protest.

“This should be more comfortable for you.”

How comfortable you are as my chair isn’t the problem here... Rose wisely chose silence over a losing argument.

“Since I have you here, can I ask you something I’ve been curious about?”

“...Go ahead,” Rose answered, exhausted.

“You once said you’ve known about me for four years. How?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“To satisfy my curiosity. I want to know if you viewed me as an object of contempt, were indifferent toward me, or had a good impression of me.”

Harij’s voice rained down on her from above with its usual calm. But Rose could feel his heart racing at a tremendous speed from where her face leaned against his chest.

She could tell he was eagerly waiting to hear her answer. Rose buried her face in his chest to hide the red of her cheeks.

“I saw you in the capital. You were wearing your blue cloak. I learned your

name...then.”

“Did we talk?”

“No, we didn’t exchange a single word.”

“I’m surprised you remembered me, in that case,” Harij said, sounding amazed, though his heartbeat sped up.

Realizing it made him happy that she remembered him, Rose buried her face deeper and mumbled, “Yeah.”

The potion’s effect wore off as suddenly as it came on.

“Rose.”

The way he spoke her name said it all. His passionless tone was like the calm enshrouding the lakeside at dawn.

“Thanks. I’ve calmed down.”

Harij patted her on the head. His touch was casual, telling her that the effect of the potion had truly subsided.

Until now, Harij was talking to her to distract himself. But before they’d talked much at all, he suddenly grew silent, and the next moment he opened his mouth, he had returned to normal. What a lackluster and anticlimactic end.

Harij removed Rose from his lap by her shoulders and stood up. Following his lead, Rose slowly climbed to her feet. The areas that had been in intimate contact with him were moist. Shockingly cold air slipped through her clothes, and she shivered.

Until only a few seconds ago, they had been close enough to melt into one, and now not even their fingers touched. What should have been a natural distance between them felt incredibly lonely.

Unlike Harij, who was freed from the potion’s spell the moment it wore off, Rose was still stuck in the moment.

I’m in shock. I knew what that potion was capable of and that the illusory bliss was temporary. So why am I so depressed?

Rose was heartbreakingly disappointed now.

“Rose.”

He spoke her name in that familiar, firm tone of his. They stood facing each other. Rose cast down her gaze, unable to look directly at him.

“Yes?” she answered in a small voice incapable of concealing her despair.

“I want you to marry me.”

“Ok—ay?” Rose whipped her head up. She couldn’t comprehend the words she heard.

Harij patiently waited for her answer, looking as serious as he might on an important mission. As far as she could tell, he wasn’t under the magic’s influence anymore.

“Didn’t you hear what I said earlier...? This potion exists just to trick these words out of people...”

“So I heard.”

Since he wouldn’t back down, his mind was probably still suffering from the residual magic in his system. He wasn’t willing to take her advice. Rose slowly repeated herself as if trying to persuade a disobedient child.

“I am a witch, and as a witch, I...don’t believe it is wrong to manipulate the human heart with magic. However...” The words clogged in her throat. She wrestled past the lump to convey her true feelings. “Presumptuous as it may be, I want you...to be happy...Mr. Client.”

To honestly tell Harij that she wished for his happiness took a lifetime’s worth of courage. After all, he knew that every word she uttered was exactly how she felt.

“I’ll be happy if I marry you.”

“Even if you mean it, you can’t marry me. For I am a witch.”

Harij arched a skeptical eyebrow at her outright rejection. “Why does being a witch make it so we can’t marry?”

“You honestly have to ask? Witches are different from humans.”

“Plenty of humans suck at telling lies.”

“That’s only the tip of the iceberg.”

“Then what else is a problem?”

Rose was stumped. Born and raised as a nobleman, Harij should have known the answer, but she felt the need to check now.

“As you very well know, witches don’t belong to any country. We don’t abide by the laws of mankind. As a man who lives supporting his kingdom, are you prepared to marry a woman not bound by the same rules?”

“I’m fully prepared. It doesn’t bother me one bit. Plenty of people marry someone from another country, with different religions and laws.”

“Y-You should know this, but not abiding by the law means you can’t have me punished no matter what dangerous potions I make or who I sell them to.”

“The same applies to blacksmiths.”

Harij was right. Rose lived her whole life believing the same thing.

“But...you are a knight. Will your ethics as a knight allow you to overlook me being acquitted of crimes when I should be punished by your laws?”

Wouldn’t that be humiliating for him? Wouldn’t it be unbearable for him not to uphold justice?

“Can’t say. My heart will guide me should that time come. I might let it pass, or I might find a way outside the law to settle things. You don’t have to use that as the reason to avoid marrying me.”

Harij snuffed out this line of thought that hinged on his emotional response. His assertion was so on point, it stole her breath for a second before she stubbornly argued back like a sore loser.

“A-Also, witches generally don’t marry.”

“Then how did you come into this world?”

“Mother...received seed from somewhere...as did my grandmother, and great-grandmother before her. Thus, when the day comes for me to pass down my magic to a child, I will receive seed from—” Rose couldn’t say the rest, because Harij was glaring fiercely at her.

He noticed her recoiling and softly sighed.

“Then I can be the provider of that seed. And we can get married while we’re at it.”

“But witches...” Rose didn’t know how to convince him. Driven into a corner, she let the truth slip. “...Witches are such beings that people rejoice...when they die.”

The truth surprised her. Rose clamped her hands over her mouth.

She had relegated those thoughts to the back of her mind and believed she had long since gotten over it.

“Well, either way, it’s for the better!”

Yet, all along, she never realized how much the words she heard four years ago still haunted her.

“Rejoice...over their death?”

Rose vehemently shook her head. With how sentimental she was right now, she feared anything she said would turn into spilling her guts.

Harij pondered her statement for a while before looking as if he had just recalled what she was referring to.

“...Four years ago, in the capital... You’re talking about that one time?” Bitterness distorted his features as he drew on a specific memory. “You overheard what they said?”

Unable to lie, Rose nodded while wryly giving him credit for remembering what must’ve been an insignificant event in his life.

“...Yes.”

“...Then you heard some hurtful things.”

The gentle voice that comforted Rose first and foremost touched on her old scars.

Yes, Rose was definitely hurt at that time. It had hurt her so deeply that she subconsciously tried to forget the pain.

Even though Harij was initially repulsed by the idea of the witches’ secret

potions, never once did he let his disgust turn to her, the Witch. After learning she was a young woman, he began treating her as he would any lady. He grabbed things that were too high for her to reach, worried after her health, and always brought her sweets.

What had started as a mere crush four years ago was encouraged enough to bloom into actual love.

“Let’s return to the topic at hand.”

“Huh?!” Startled, she yelped through her fingers.

Rose was positive she had brought the topic to a close with her sound argument. It was doubly backed by Harij remembering the incident. He knew countless people hated witches.

Nobody would want a wife whose death would be a celebration for others.

“Why are you so surprised?”

“Why? Because...witches are an object of such hatred people find it pleasing when they—”

“Listen here. If there’s even a single person who’s happy about your death, I’ll pummel him until he doesn’t know what hit him.”

Pummel. Rose’s cheeks twitched at the unusually aggressive word choice from Harij. Seeing her reaction drew an annoyed sigh from him.

“You keep repeating ‘witch this, witch that.’ I came here to place an order with a witch. I knew who you were from day one. Rose the Witch is the woman for me.”

“Um?”

“You really don’t get it? You never considered why I rushed here without changing?”

Rose’s gaze went straight to Harij’s clothes. Come to think about it, last night he came during an hour when most people were still awake. Who knew what scandalous rumors would spread about the knight who visited the Witch’s hermitage at night. His traveler’s cloak wasn’t among his things she collected off the shore. Quite the contrary, he had been wearing the blue cloak symbolizing

that he was a Royal Knight.

Rose blinked several times.

“Listen to me well, Rose, and be sure to remember this,” Harij said patiently, as if instructing a child. “The Witch may tell a lie to save me out of her enormously kind and meddlesome heart, but most men have ulterior motives when they put their life on the line.”

Harij inched closer. Rose flinched.

“There isn’t a man out there who would dive into a freezing lake to save a woman he isn’t in love with.”

Though he said it with a strained laugh, his serious eyes held Rose hostage. He slowly edged closer, careful not to frighten her, and rested his hand on her cheek.

“You just have to answer this one question—do you love me?”

Rose was a witch. Witches who used magic couldn’t tell lies. And Harij understood that perfectly.

Realizing his true intentions, Rose blushed. He went down on one knee and stared into her teary eyes.

“...I don’t want to...answer...because it will be a lie.”

That was the trick Harij taught her out of kindness.

“Aren’t I the only person to whom you can honestly say, ‘I don’t want to say anything because it will be a lie’ when it shows up on your face?”

These words could only be said to Harij because he knew the witches’ secret, and she could only say it to him because she trusted him.

“You’re surprisingly stubborn,” Harij teased, accepting her stubbornness with an ecstatic smile. After all, Rose could have easily told him if she hated him.

Harij slowly leaned toward Rose’s apple-colored cheeks. Even though the potion had worn off, his burning, passionate eyes came closer.

Rose squeezed her eyes shut. She knew exactly why Harij had asked her not to close them while under the potion’s influence.



And then, it happened—

“Eat this! Mud bomb!”

SPLAT!

A mud ball was thrown at the back of Harij’s head.

Rose and Harij, who stopped breathing at the same time, slowly looked at the front door. A bunch of children with handfuls of mud balls stood there. Adults armed with hatchets and hoes were right behind them. The grown-ups apologetically averted their gazes.

“Er, sorry about that... The kids told us the Witch was being assaulted by a man... So we rushed over hoping to help...,” one of the men said awkwardly.

Did the kids summon their parents out of a debt of gratitude for the roasted potatoes? Blushing like wildfire, Rose pulled away from Harij.

“Get away from the Witch! Even if she’s a witch, she’s a girl, too, y’know!”

The kids drew back their arms, ready to launch the mud bombs. Rose dropped to the floor.

Epilogue: Witch **HIDDEN** deep within the forest was a lake.

In the middle of the pristine lake floated a small island upon which a lone witch's hermitage stood. For decades and centuries the scenery had remained unchanged.

Since ancient times, the witches who lived there sometimes helped people, guided them, or profited off their wishes.

Today, like the days of yore, a small boat arrived at the Witch's hermitage. The man and woman on board disembarked with familiar ease. The woman glided from the dock to the hovel knowing the exact steps needed to cover the distance and flipped over the closed sign hanging out front. Satisfied that the sign now read "Open," the Witch pulled the key from her neck, unlocked the door, and entered the building.

Boots trotted the ground behind her.

"You don't have to come with me...every time you have a day off, you know?" Rose muttered with a hint of dismay to Harij, who followed her. "You should take it easy on your days off at least..."

"I come here *to take it easy*. So it's all good."

Harij pulled a tablecloth out of the basket he brought. His broad hands smoothly spread it to the edges of the table without a wrinkle. It smelled of being fresh out of the laundry.

He took a book out of the basket and sat on his usual chair bathed in sunlight shining through the small window. Spending time with Rose while sitting in his special chair without disturbing her work had become Harij's favorite way to spend his days off recently.

Harij had received his reinstatement orders after he had successfully escorted Billaura to the border. In other words, it was two months after the breakin and the incident with the horrifying accidental ingestion of a love potion. The long time off was likely to reward him for his many years of service without using leave. After his two-month break, Harij was reinstated as a Royal Knight serving

within the palace.

The reason why Rose was so informed about Harij's situation was because she was now living under his care as a houseguest in his manor.

Even Rose, who never thought about taking preemptive measures to prevent home invasions, had been traumatized enough by the breakin to think twice about it now. She tried to do as much as she could to strengthen the island's security with Harij's assistance, but his worries were endless. Eventually, he obstinately insisted he would live in the hermitage with her.

Things probably would have been solved quite easily if she had immediately accepted his marriage proposal.

But, to the witch who had lived as a shut-in recluse since birth, *change* was the scariest thing in the world. Generations of witches had lived on this land and protected it, and it was also the irreplaceable home she grew up in and loved. She couldn't give it up for good.

After a lot of back and forth discussions, Rose decided to reside in Harij's manor at night. During the day, she resumed her duties as a witch in the hermitage. The fact that he welcomed her into his home as a houseguest rather than his fiancée showed how much he was being considerate of Rose, who couldn't make up her mind about marriage.

Where she lived wasn't the only thing in Rose's life that had changed. For some reason, people were becoming friendlier toward witches.

Did Harij successfully convince them? Or was it because Rose didn't look like the hideous witches in stories? The answer was a mystery. Rose knew that humans easily changed their minds, but also not *that* easily. It was because they didn't change that Rose was able to make a living as a witch.

Still, while Harij might have asked them to do it, people occasionally ventured from the city into the forest to check on her. They might not have been 100 percent sincere about it, but Rose simply decided to accept their kindness at face value.

The lake had also become a playground for the children, and they sometimes left fruit in front of the hermitage for her.

“Ouch...!”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Happens all the time.”

The hermitage was still a castle of clutter. Rose put the vase she accidentally kicked back in its original spot. Her gaze dropped to her feet as she stood up.

Rose was wearing a new pair of boots. Harij had bought them for her after she gave her spare pair to Billaure. These were completely different from her prior drab and tasteless boots. While emphasizing practicality, they were also delicate enough to decorate a lady's feet. They could probably last for years as long as she took proper care of them. Small beads had been embroidered in an ivy pattern along the polished black upper leather. Rose was smitten with the way they glittered in the light with every step.

“Oh, right, Harij, would you mind checking the mailbox for me?”

Clients still came to the Witch seeking the witches' secret potions even though she wasn't in business twenty-four hours a day anymore.

She prepared a signboard informing them to leave a note in the mailbox describing what they needed and the next day and time they planned to visit. Harij accepted the mailbox key from her without complaint and fetched the letters. He came back with a single envelope the color of lettuce, or rather, the soft shade of spring buds.

“Thank you... Oh, it's from Lady Lau.”

Harij was surprised when Rose mentioned the name of the sender.

“I haven't received a single letter from her yet!”

“Girls mature faster than boys. They stop clinging to their older brothers sooner.”

Rose tore open the seal, careful not to rip the paper inside. Unfortunately, she didn't have a letter opener.

Lau's letters were easy to read and enjoyable for Rose, who had little experience exchanging missives. Beginning with seasonal greetings, Lau would then launch into a fascinating story about recent events.

“Do you...well...often get correspondence from her?” Harij asked, fidgeting restlessly as Rose scanned the contents of the letter with a soft smile.

“This would be the third.”

“...His Majesty would cry if he knew,” he said with a grimace. He seemed to feel sorry for his friend.

The second prince, and the older brother closest in age to Billaura, was Harij’s childhood friend. And Harij just so happened to be reappointed as the second prince’s Royal Knight.

“...My, oh my,” Rose muttered while reading the letter.

“What’s wrong? Something happen?”

Harij hurried over to her side but was too much of a gentleman to impolitely peek at the letter. Clutching to her chest the paper that conveyed an important message, Rose looked up at Harij through her lashes.

How much will he panic if I tell him? Rose tightened her jaw and schooled her features into something more serious.

“It seems congratulations are in order.”

“Congratulations for what?”

“Lady Lau seems to be pregnant.”

Harij’s eyes bulged. His mouth fell open, but no words came out.

Rose bit the inside of her cheek, desperate to stop her lips from breaking into a wide smile at his obvious reaction.

“The potion seems to have helped. As far as I can tell from her letter, this is what Lady Lau wanted.”

Rose softly smiled over the blossoming romance between Nefrit’s king and Billaura as described in the letter.

The king of Nefrit had seen a semblance of his deceased wife in the much younger Billaura when they met while he was out on royal business. The king waited until she came of age to formally propose to her through the official channels of their kingdoms so that he could legally leave an inheritance to the

young princess once he passed away.

Judging from what Billaura wrote about their married life, the elderly king wasn't after a romantic or physical relationship with her. Falling in love with such a devoted king, Billaura was the one who eventually threatened him into bed: "If this is the way our life is to be, then I'll just drink this!"

The poor king. He misunderstood the secret potion his young wife had sneaked in from her homeland as a poison to end her life.

He couldn't very well let his dear Billaura, whom he yearned after for a great many years, die by her own hands. So he reasoned that he, an elderly man with few years left to live, should die instead for forcing Billaura into a marriage she would commit suicide to escape.

The king also had a great successor. He downed what was left in the vial for his young wife with a promising future after she took a sip—not the least bit aware of what the potion was.

"He's forty years older than her!"

"Anything goes as long as there is love and consent, Harij."

Harij wouldn't have wanted for Billaura to be mistreated or given the cold shoulder, but this bit of news came a little too soon for him. Shock rendered him speechless.

Considering the king's age, Rose might start receiving orders for the potion's functional uses for men. It wouldn't hurt to prepare for future requests. She heard a familiar sound as she was calculating costs in her head.

Ding-a-ling.

The bell announcing the arrival of a visitor rang. She looked through the window to where a man looked back at her, waving. Next to the man were three donkeys—each saddled with piles of bags.

"....."

Rose buried her face in one hand. Harij peered out the window beside her. Their shoulders touched.

"It's that man..."

“You know Tien?”

“I’ve crossed paths with him here before.”

“Oh yes, I remember something like that happening...,” Rose answered with her attention elsewhere.

Harij scooped up a lock of her pale-pink hair. He looked unhappily outside as he twirled that lock around his finger.

“What’s that pile of goods for?”

“Um, well, it’s...” Rose frowned in place of an answer. She was being distracted by him tugging on her hair, but the more urgent problem was on the other side of the lake.

“You aren’t going to tell me those are all gifts, right?”

Her head sank lower and lower instead of responding.

“I’ll go refuse him,” Harij said.

“Wait! Um, those things are, well, well!”

“I’ll get you anything you need. Don’t accept stuff from other men again.”

There he was being arrogant again, but the jealousy she sensed in his words turned Rose pink down to her neckline.

Regardless, she couldn’t yield the point to him. Rose covered her face with both hands.

“All of that is...well...you could call it a gift...but not quite...so...um...”

“What is it?”

“In other words, it’s...”

“Yeah?”

“Supposed to be given...in place of my parents...”

“Huh?”

“Tien—he has been looking out for me since I was a girl...and, um, it seems like my grandma asked him to take care of me on her deathbed...”

“Yeah?”

“So...um...I think it’s probably *that*...”

Damn you, Tien! Why did you have to come today of all days?! Rose cursed him out in her heart.

Tired of beating around the bush, she shouted, “I’m trying to tell you that it’s supposed to be my dowry!”

Harij eyed Tien but didn’t say anything more.

A dowry is something a woman’s family prepares for when she marries. In other words, that could only mean she intended to marry Harij.

White flowers would bloom in the forest soon.

Undoubtedly, they were going to bear sweet, red fruit.



Side Story

The Witch's Shadow
and the Cradle of
Happiness

Side Story: The Witch's Shadow and the Cradle of Happiness **THIS** is the story of what happened shortly before Rose received the third letter from Lau. It took place two months after that terrifying run-in with the thief...and Harij's accidental consumption of the love potion.

"Can you please explain what in the world has gotten into you to say such ridiculous things...?" Rose asked Harij for the hundredth time.

She sat down with her robe spread out on the floor beneath her as she turned the quern-stone. The rumbling crunch of the turning stone and the rhythmic clanging of bottles in the boiling pot created a unique kind of background music. Feeling the crushed ingredients spilling from the stone through the vibrations it conveyed to her hands, Rose shot Harij an annoyed look.

"I already explained it to you. I'm going to live here, too. Can't I?"

"Ugh. A good-looking man is spouting nonsense in my living room..."

Spring sunlight spilled through the windows, adding an extra sparkling glow around Harij. Framing him with stunning lighting effects multiplied the attractiveness of his already handsome face fourteen times. Rose had the urge to worship Harij, who had risen in ranked from good-looking to godly good looks.

Surrounded by the forest and lake, the hermitage was at the center of a cheerful and glorious season. Spring ephemerals leafed out and flowered, extending the fresh, young green hue to the forest canopy. Birds heralding the arrival of spring hopped along the windowsill. Some of the small birds seemed to be fledglings, and they were hitting the walls of the hermitage while practicing with their wings.

"What don't you understand?" Harij argued back, too serious to pay attention to their adorable little visitors. "Simply put, I can't leave you alone in this hermitage after what happened. I can be with you right now because I'm on

leave, but my new post starts in a few days. Someone can stay with you during the day, and then I will live here during the night as your bodyguard and—”

“You can’t... I seriously don’t get you...”

Rose crouched in her work area bent over the quern-stone. Her hands moved without stopping, powered by the firm belief that crushing things would help her forget Harij’s disturbing suggestion.

For many years, she lived in this flimsy hovel teetering on the edge of being blown away by a strong breeze, without any concern for her safety or living conditions. But after letting a dangerous man easily walk through her front door, even Rose started to feel unsafe in the home she had grown up in.

Ever since the thief barged into her house, Rose had declined nighttime visits out of a new sense of self-preservation. Naturally, she changed her locks to the latest version and tied the boat to the reel with a new rope. She asked Tien for one braided with iron so it couldn’t be easily cut. Tien hastened to make arrangements for it after hearing about the thief.

As an extra countermeasure, she also kept the boat docked at the island. Although it increased her workload, Rose fetched every client to cut down on unwanted visitors. Without a boat, there wasn’t a thief in the world who would risk their life swimming across a freezing lake to rob a dilapidated hovel. Winter protected the hermitage by turning the island into a natural fortress, but once spring came, things changed.

During the spring, the lake was crystal clear and mystical enough that it wouldn’t be strange to spot a mermaid swimming there. The water was still icy, but not life-threatening. Immediately after the thief broke in, Harij suggested that the vigilante corps watch out for the Witch’s hermitage, and requested that their patrol route be widened to include it. Harij easily took care of things that never even entered Rose’s thoughts.

To top everything else off, during his leave period, Harij visited the Witch’s hermitage almost every day. As a result, clients stopped coming by, dooming her business, but...of course it was reassuring to have him around.

And above all else, being with Harij brought Rose great joy. After all—
“Aaaaaah...!”

“What’s wrong?!”

“Nothing... I’m all right. I just...remembered a lot...of different things...various things...,” Rose mumbled, wiping away the sweat springing to her back and forehead.

This was yet another unfathomable thing, but for whatever inexplicable reason, Rose and Harij had mutual feelings for each other and were currently in a relationship. Undoubtedly, this was the magic called “Pinch-Hit Walk-Off Grand Slam” that she read about in a book obtained from a distant world.

She argued that with the power of the witches’ secret potion she could make a man or two fall for her, but when Harij confessed he had fallen in love with her before drinking the love potion, the witch who could only rely on the potions to refuse him had no choice but to wave the white flag in defeat.

Despite two months having passed since confirming each other’s feelings, Rose lived while trying the best she could to avoid all things romantic—she just wasn’t mentally prepared for it.

Perhaps he was relieved to know she felt the same for him, because Harij kept the raging billows of his desire hidden just below the calm surface.

But it seemed that Rose had made a place in his heart. He naturally protected her and treated her as a loved one.

“Nggh! Bah! It’s this flea-like heart that I despise...,” Rose groaned, still unable to accept her new reality, and pressed a hand over her hammering heart.

“You look okay to me,” Harij said wryly, pulling Rose to her feet. He dusted off her robe as he might for a child.

Rose knew he was naturally a physical person, but since confessing his feelings, Harij restrained from touching her. Each time, Rose recited the *Herbal Basics for Witches* in her head starting from page one until she calmed down.

“Anyway, let’s set aside this move-in talk for another day...”

“You’ve been setting it aside for so many days, winter is over. It’ll rot if you carry on into summer like this.”

“Conversations do not *rot*...”

“Then let me ask you this: Why are you so opposed to me living here?” Harij asked, sounding hurt and sullen. Until now, he’d shown plenty of tolerance for the indecisive witch, but it seemed he had finally run out of patience.

Rose looked away and painstakingly explained, “I could never make someone as noble as you live in this shack.”

“I don’t mind. I often stay in rustic inns or camp outdoors during expeditions. Though most of those places are cleaner than here.” Relief rung in his voice, which had lost its prior surliness.

“You can only fit one bed in here, and I’m still not ready yet to...s-sleep together.”

“Not ready yet? Does that mean you will be someday?”

There was a loud bang. Flustered beyond belief, Rose smacked her leg into the corner of the workbench. Deciding to take mercy on her, Harij changed the topic.

“I like it here. This is the home you were raised in, Rose.”

Stand and there’s a spiderweb; sit and there’s dust; walk and the floorboards creak—the house fit the definition of a run-down hovel word for word and it was still an important place to Rose. Regardless of what it meant to her, it was ridiculous to let a natural-born nobleman stay in such a ramshackle hut. It was worse than pouring cold water into boiling-hot oil.

“I’m a knight, I can take care of myself. I won’t get in your way. You can continue going about your work as a witch with me here.”

At her wit’s end, Rose didn’t argue back. She wasn’t used to experiencing kindness. Nor did she know that being treated kindly could be this bothersome.

Harij sighed, sensing how much pressure it was putting on her. “Fine. I’ll let it go for today. In return—”

“Eep.” Rose recoiled in an obvious way. For the past two months, she had been able to predict what he would say next.

“Stop playing games and call me by name, would you?”

Rose clamped her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. “Lalalala!”

Something touched the top of her head as she sang over him. Something soft and warm. Realizing what it was, her eyes snapped open and she strained her neck back. Harij's face was surprisingly close.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What are—"

"Rose. I've been patiently prioritizing your feelings, but we're actually in the kind of relationship where we can do intimate things. Did you know that?"

He was coming on strong. That was a pretty clear declaration that he was more than ready to take things to the next level, though she still hesitated.

Obviously, Rose wasn't against being intimate with him. She was just too unfamiliar with these things.

"...Wh-What are..."

Raising his beautifully manicured eyebrows, Harij cupped her cheek. Then he slowly stroked her lip with his thumb, showing her exactly what he meant. Rose promptly gave in.

"*Sir...Harij!*"

"I'll let it pass."

Freed from his hand, Rose immediately fell to her hands and knees on the floor. She hugged herself as dust clouds puffed up around her. She was so hot it felt as if her blood was boiling.

"U-Ughhh, your face...it's too beautiful..."

"Yeah, it is."

Harij stopped being weirded out by her wacky comments and played along as he pulled her up off the dusty floor and plucked the specks out of her pale-pink hair.

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"**WANT** to go out for some sherbet?"

The next day, Harij, who had been out on business, invited Rose the instant he returned to the hermitage. She blinked at him.

"What is *SHER-but*?"

“A frozen dessert made from fruit. Think of it as a frozen sweet. A peddler from the north brought a large amount of ice. His Majesty is treating the whole capital with it to commemorate Princess Billaura’s marriage.”

“Dessert.”

“A *sweet* dessert,” Harij repeated to drive home the point.

Because of him, Rose had become woefully weak to the mere mention of sweets. Excited, she pulled off her robe to go into the city.

Together they climbed into the fiacre she usually rode into the city alone. As they swayed in the hooded carriage, Harij seemed as though he was in a great mood. “You take off your robe when you go into the city, right? I was surprised the last time I saw you.”

“...You’ve seen me in the city before?”

“Twice.”

I can’t remember a single time, but he says it happened twice? Rose fished through her memories until she realized he was talking about the time the children pelted her with mud balls. She couldn’t figure out what the second time was.

“At the forest dock and during Princess Billaura’s bridal procession.”

Now that he mentioned it, she remembered when he was talking about. Harij actually noticed her there? So it wasn’t just Rose’s hopeful imagination that their eyes met.

“I was surprised because I never expected to see you there.”

Rose was paralyzed in her seat because Harij’s whole face beamed with the memory of their encounter. Too much for her to withstand, she thrust both hands in front of her.

“...What is it?”

“You’re too radiant...”

“That again?” Harij sighed after she shoved his face away. Head turned, he caught sight of what was outside the window and tapped Rose on the hand.

“Rose, look out there. Going straight down this road will take you to my house.”

Harij pointed out a lushly green road. Rose was surprised because she thought he lived in a more central residential area in the city.

“It looks like a nice and quiet area.”

“There are only a few houses on this road, so you’ll be able to get here quick if you use the black rooftops as a marker. Come anytime something happens.”

There are open places like this in the royal capital? The place I always thought was just infested with people and rows of cramped houses? Rose leaned against the carriage wall and stared outside.

“Sorry,” Harij suddenly said. “I lied.”

Rose looked over at him, reacting to the word *lied*.

“Come anytime you feel like it, not just when something happens.”

Rose shut her mouth first, thought about it, then slowly repeated, “Anytime?”

“Yeah.”

“Whenever I feel like it...?”

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

Harij flashed a wry smile. Seeing him smile out of the blue sent Rose’s heart clamoring in her ears.

“I want you to like that house, too.”

Tender love softened his eyes.

Inside the swaying carriage, Rose could only muster “Mmkay” as a reply.

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“**IT’S** over there.”

They climbed out of the fiacre and walked a short distance to their destination. A simple marketplace had been set up underneath a canopy.

Locals crowded the area seeking sherbet.

It had been a long time since Rose last visited the city with someone. In the past, she had trailed close behind her stooped-over grandma.

Today, however, she was not with her grandma.

Rose glanced up at Harij standing next to her and immediately turned her gaze forward. Letting down her guard risked her cheek muscles moving against her will. Without a robe to hide under, that was the number one embarrassment she had to avoid.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Rose chewed out, her lips failing to listen to her as well.

“Well, hello there, Harij! Thank you for always looking out for us!” someone said loudly behind them.

“Are you on patrol today, too?”

Several young men had called out to them. Residents who owned stores in the capital seemed to be handing out sherbet. Each of them wore an apron with their store name embroidered on it.

“No. As you can see, I’m with someone today.”

Harij tugged on Rose’s arm. She fell against his side and he put his arm around her.

Scandalous whispers spread from the people who saw. The ladies who were waiting for their chance to talk to him gawked in disbelief. The men working the stalls in front of them let out hearty laughs.

“Well, what do you know? Harij does indeed have a lady in his life.”

“Now that’s funny! My wife kept talking my ear off saying ‘There’s no way he has a lady friend when he patrols the city on his days off under the pretense of having nothing better to do.’”

“I see.”

It sounded as though the cityfolk didn’t know Harij’s occupation or social class. Evidently, they only thought of him as a great guy who kept watch on his days off out of the kindness of his heart.

“She’s quite plain to be your lady, Harij.”

In every world there’s always going to be that one old man or woman who says one word too many. Rose hardened her heart and stared at the old man. He winced instead of forcing an insincere smile at her completely flat, unchanging expression.

“She’s not plain,” Harij argued, then went on. “She’s cute from every angle.”

She wrenched her hand free and backed away faster than a feral cat. Her legs quickly carried her away. Harij chased after her, leaving behind the stunned shopkeepers and their wives.

“What’s wrong? It’s dangerous for you to suddenly take off like that.”

You’re the dangerous one here! Oh, how she wanted to shout at him. Her heart had all but stopped. Harij held out his hand to the Witch, who trembled in silent anger.

“Rose, I want to hold hands. Can we?”

One look at his offered hand and Rose flattened her lips in a straight line. Harij had a habit of asking for permission first. Since they were already in a relationship, she wished he’d just take her hand.

“You can say no if you don’t want to.”

Rose was a witch. Witches couldn’t lie.

Of course she wanted to, so she couldn’t say otherwise.

Grinding her teeth, Rose placed her hand on top of his. And then she uttered the special incantation she could only use on him.

“I don’t want to...say it!”

“Okay.”

Harij slipped his fingers through hers and squeezed. Together they walked through the throngs of people. Trying her best not to look at their connected hands, Rose awkwardly moved her legs and arms out at the same time. An unnatural amount of sweat seemed to be dripping down her fingers. She desperately wrestled with herself to suppress the urge to immediately wrench

her sweaty hand away.

The sherbet was being given out for free. They patiently waited in the long line, and when their turn finally came, the sherbet containers were nearly empty.

“Oh, if it isn’t Harij,” the man scooping sherbet casually said. “Welcome, welcome. You’re in luck. We still have a little left— Oh, are you on a date? Then take two.”

When the man saw Harij and Rose holding hands, he grinned and held out two cups. Sherbet was packed into mismatched containers collected from the different restaurants in the area. They each accepted one from him. The tin cup was cold to the touch. They moved, hand in hand, somewhere away from the crowds to eat.

Rose didn’t mind holding hands with Harij now. Her full attention had been captivated by the tin cup she was holding, after all. The first sherbet she ever saw was a dreamy food that looked like a melting snowball.

The smallest snow crystals glittered under the sunlight. The melted spots sparkled like flower nectar, making her mouth water.

Noticing her eyes glued to the sherbet, Harij stopped walking. Rose didn’t remove her eyes from the sweet treat when she asked, “Can I eat it now?”

“Yeah.”

Permission granted, Rose picked up the little tree branch sticking out of the sherbet. The tip had been flattened into a simple spoon.

She scooped the frozen dessert onto the spoon. She ran the spoon over the top gentler than if she were petting a frightened baby rabbit and gingerly brought it to her mouth. The sherbet was snow white, so she assumed it’d taste like snow, but it actually tasted like apples. It quickly melted on her tongue like the fleeting end of spring.

Seeking another bite of the icy goodness that melted the instant it touched her tongue, Rose brought the spoon back to her mouth. Then she took another bite, followed by yet another. She didn’t know what was so entertaining about her eating, but Harij watched her without taking a single spoonful of his.

As Rose became entranced with eating, she heard a fierce shout. “Don’t cry!” Shoulders jumping, she finally wrenched her eyes from the sherbet to look at the noise.

“B-But...I w-want...wanted...to e-eat it!” a young girl cried through her sobs. Beside her stood a slightly older boy.

“What do expect from me? They ran out!”

The boy also sounded as if he was trying to hide his disappointment. From the look of it, they had run out of sherbet to hand out. Spoon hanging from her mouth, Rose watched the siblings.

Like the older brother said, he can’t do anything about it for her. But I also understand why the little sister is sad. You don’t get to taste something this delicious every day.

Someone cut in front of Rose. Harij approached the siblings and patted the girl on the head. Then he did the same to the brother and handed them the sherbet he was holding. The boy was flustered to suddenly receive the dessert, but Harij left before he could reject it.

Rose eyed Harij with the spoon still dangling from her mouth.

“This is mine.”

“I never planned on taking yours.”

Satisfied by his answer, Rose busily moved the spoon from the cup to her mouth. Every bite was just as delicious as the first.

Rose continued eating, full of satisfaction over the taste and Harij’s response, but her spoon soon hit the bottom of the cup with only a small bit left. Depressed, she stared at the remaining sherbet, glanced over at Harij, and then back at the sherbet.

“...Just one bite.”

“I’ll take it,” he instantly responded, bending down and opening his mouth.

Rose reluctantly stuck the spoon in his mouth.

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“S-STAMINA monster...”

Finally leaving the festivities, Rose crouched down inside the fiacre and cursed Harij. Dragged around here and there after finishing the sherbet, she was exhausted.

Don't underestimate a shut-in's lack of stamina! Rose was tired enough to resent the crow crowing at the sunset.

“Sleep for a bit. I'll wake you near the forest,” Harij offered, not at all bothered by her grumbling.

“Don't want to.”

I never want to experience the shame of him seeing my stupid just-waking-up face again.

Reality cruelly ignores wishes. Rose was fast asleep within a few minutes.

She awoke in the forest. The first thing she saw was her swaying feet. Stupefied, she blinked until she realized Harij was carrying her on his back.

“Wh-Wha?!”

“Awake now?” Harij asked, sounding no different from usual despite giving her a piggyback ride. Her face went paper white.

“Why? Carry? Heavy...!”

“Stay put for a bit. I know you're tired.”

She was dead tired, but she would rather walk home with her feet covered in blood blisters than make him carry her. But Harij wouldn't let go no matter how much she squirmed and struggled. Rose gave in and knocked her cheek against his back. Now that it came to this, she wanted to get back at him and flexed.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to make it so I'm too heavy to carry.”

“You aren't heavy. You're lighter than a feather.”

“Humans lie so easily. Hmph,” she snorted.

Harij's throat shook with laughter. Rose was curious what kind of face he was

making as he laughed.

But she was positive not being able to see each other's faces while they were in close contact was what allowed her to keep calm enough to be open with him.

Rose quietly said, "Harij."

His grip loosened on her legs. He held her back up before she could even feel as if she was falling.

"...What is it?"

It seemed to be quite the shock for him to hear her call him just "Harij" after how stubbornly she refused to say his name even with honorifics. His voice had cracked.

Today, Rose had heard countless people in the city call him Harij. Everyone spoke to him affectionately. The trust he had built up with them until now was kindly returned with the way they said his name.

Rose loved the ring of it.

"Is it all right if...I stay at your manor only during the night?"

This time she felt her bottom drop without anything to hold it up. But, naturally, he supported her before she could slide all the way down his back.

"...Of course."

His answer was concise, as if he feared she would withdraw her request if he ruined her mood by asking a question or said anything more than that.

Rose rubbed her forehead into his back.

One long shadow walked through the forest.

I remember seeing a shadow like this as a kid. Rose quietly closed her eyes while being rocked to sleep in the cradle of happiness.



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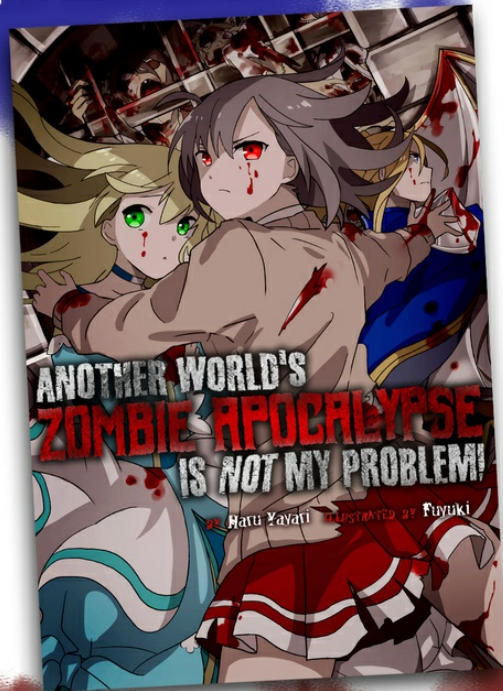
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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!

