
Accidentally in Love:
The Witch, the Knight, and the Love Potion Slipup
Harunadon
[ILLUSTRATION]
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Accidentally in Love: The Witch, the Knight, and the Love Potion Slipup Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue: The Day the Dream Died

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a beautiful princess.

Beautiful in both body and mind, the princess was loved and adored by all. Every single day the king, the queen, and all of the castle attendants let her know just how beautiful she was. The birds of the kingdom treated her with beautiful twittering melodies. Even the wind, seeking to please her, used a strong gust to cause a crown of white clovers to settle upon her head.

One day, there was a huge ball at the castle. There, the princess met the prince of a neighboring kingdom, and when these two beautiful youths locked eyes, it was love at first sight.

“Oh, beauteous one. Would you lend me your hand in dance?”

“Yes, gladly.”

The room was full of joy as everyone looked upon this couple who were perfect for one another.

However, a wicked witch lived in the forest surrounding the castle, and she was full of jealousy at the princess’s beauty.

This ugly witch was loved by no one and spent her days deep in the woods concocting vile potions. As rumors of the beautiful princess reached her ears, her heart filled with hatred for this woman who wanted for nothing at all.

“I know what I’ll do—I’ll make a special potion just for her. One sip and she’ll be transformed into a pig! Hee hee hee!”

Disguised as one of the castle’s maids-in-waiting, the witch sped to the castle using her magic. At the ball, she approached the princess and offered her the potion, declaring it to be a most delectable beverage.

In that moment, disaster struck! The beautiful princess was transformed into a little piglet. The witch cackled with laughter at the success of her trickery.

Fortunately for all, there was no need to worry. The birds had seen everything and told the panic-stricken room the truth.

“That piglet is our princess! Don’t harm her!”

“That woman is a foul witch! Kill her!”

Hearing this, the prince grabbed the disguised witch and threw her from the castle’s balcony.

The witch let out a frightful scream as she plummeted to her death. As her screams faded, the most mysterious thing occurred—the princess transformed back into her beautiful self.

And so, the prince and the princess lived happily ever after.

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“Ahh, what a lovely story.”

Cecily Ramps held the book in her small hands and clutched it close to her chest. She was a pretty young girl, with flowing flaxen hair and sparkling red eyes.

Puffing out her rosy cheeks with a sigh, she bathed in the afterglow of the story. Cecily had only just finished reading this picture book, but it had already become one of her favorites. She was certain that she would read it again and again over the coming nights, and that it would never fail to fill her breast with excitement. She was sure of it, for after all, Cecily loved fairy tales which had a touch of the dramatic to them.

Two young lovers meet and then, after many twists and turns, they end up together and find happiness. Such tales bursting with excitement and passion had filled her heart with joy ever since she could remember.

And most of these stories had something in common: the appearance of someone who would somehow impede the two lovers.

A stepmother and stepsisters. Fiendish crones and sinister witches who lived by the sea or in a forest somewhere. Ugly toads... That sort of thing.

Of these, the one that appeared most in her favorite stories was the witch. These witches usually hid away somewhere concocting mysterious potions and using them to cause trouble for the main character of the stories.

“It was a witch who tried to ruin things in this story too. Why don’t they ever

learn?”

A potion to transform a girl in the prime of her youth into a pig? Absolutely dreadful. *Thank goodness there weren’t any mirrors at the ball*, Cecily thought as she put her hand to her breast. If the poor princess had seen herself transformed into such a terrible state, she might have died of shock.

“Unlucky for her, though. In the face of true love, a wicked witch stands no chance.”

Cecily let out a precocious laugh. She wasn’t sure herself what exactly love was or what it entailed, but she wanted to experience such a wonderful thing herself.

“A dashing prince atop a white horse...”

Her imagination leapt to this image of a prince she had yet to even meet. Just what would this prince look like? What would he sound like?

“Cecily! You can’t have both love and marriage at once!”

It was a while later, on the day of her tenth birthday, that her mother said those words.

Cecily froze as she took in what her mother, Greta, had said. She had been reading a picture book as usual when Greta had suddenly burst into her room and uttered those words. Cecily still couldn’t comprehend what she meant by them.

“Wh-What do you mean, mom? Daddy loves you, doesn’t he?”

Unable to even stand, Cecily could barely get these words out. After all, that was her truth. From what she could see, her parents got on well; they were still acting lovey-dovey with each other, as if still in their honeymoon phase.

All the same, Greta continued coldly, trembling all over, “That’s because I made him drink a love potion!”

Krakoom!

Greta’s words sent a shock through the young Cecily, as if she’d been hit by a bolt of lightning.



In fact, the weather outside was equally stormy. Lightning flashed through the sky outside, and thunder rumbled in the distance. The downpour seemed to cut into the very earth, striking it with endless force.

Maybe that's why the creak of the window frame nearly drowned out Cecily's tremulous voice.

"A...love potion?"

This wasn't the first she'd heard of a love potion. After all, they had appeared in her stories countless times.

A forbidden concoction that the witch would use in order to make people her own. When the prince drank one, he would fall in love with the witch instead of the princess.

In her shock, Cecily could only gulp.

"Mom, you don't mean to say..."

"Yes, you've guessed it, Cecily. I'm a witch."

Cecily hoped that her mother was lying. But Greta only nodded, shattering any possibility of that.

The images of those nasty witches began to overlay with her very own mother.

"Look at my eyes, Cecily."

Still in a daze, Cecily gazed into her mother's eyes—red ones so beautiful you felt yourself being sucked into them.

"Red eyes are proof of being a witch. It's not just me. The girls who live next door, and even you, Cecily—have red eyes, do you not?"

Cecily realized something just then.

Filled with a sudden impulse she rifled through her picture books.

This can't be...

Each witch that appeared in the pages of those stories had red eyes. So many people around Cecily had red eyes that she had never thought anything of it.

“We live in a village of witches, Cecily. You’re ten years old today, are you not? It is the rule of witch society that all witches learn the truth of their identity on their tenth birthday.”

Cecily was too stunned to speak. She felt as if the foundation of everything she had known up till now was crumbling away beneath her feet, like sand.

“I’m...a witch?”

Her whisper was drowned out by the dark, relentless rain.

Chapter 1: The Witch Who Lives Alone in the Forest

In a quiet room, filled with the gentle breathing of a young woman...

...all of a sudden, said young woman's small button nose was squashed.

Cecily let out a muffled scream as she was startled awake. But no matter how much she wriggled, whatever it was that blocked her nose and mouth wouldn't budge.

"Mmf! Grmf!"

Cecily slowly opened her eyes after a moment of silent struggling. Through eyes made blurry by sleep, she could see a pair of fuzzy legs. Steeling her resolve to get up, Cecily slowly forced herself upright.

"Morning, Rolo."

As she yawned her good morning, Rolo let out a meow in reply as if to say, *Finally up, huh?*

Stretching in order to shake off the last vestiges of sleep, Cecily got out of bed. She poured freshly drawn cold water from the well into a small bucket and washed her face.

Finally properly awake, she cut a slice of bread from a loaf and topped it with salted ham and cheese. Then, checking to see what food she had left, Cecily tapped her chin in thought.

"Looks like I'll have to head out today after all," she murmured.

She fixed herself a salad alongside the bread using vegetables that had been grown in the allotment behind the house. Then, as usual, she laid out some dried fish for her darling yet greedy cat who always craved a big breakfast.

Rolo let out a contented purr as he crunched on the fish's head. Watching him, Cecily sat down at the small table and began her own breakfast.

The trees outside, laden with leaves, peered in through the window. The

sound of birds chirping to one another filtered in through the glass. It was a peaceful morning, just like any other.

Six years had already passed since Cecily found out she was a witch, making her sixteen now.

She wasn't particularly stunning, but she was a young woman with a pleasant-enough appearance. She had almond-shaped eyes, and her shoulder-length hair that lightly curled at the ends was somewhat feline. Her figure was well proportioned, with the baby fat that came with a girl of her age. During her walks about the town, she would perhaps catch the attention of a few young men.

However, her only company was the pet cat who occasionally mewed at her. The table where she ate and did her sewing was the perfect size for one person, while her home, too, was big enough for a girl who lived on her own.

It was around a year ago that Cecily had been forced out of the witch village she was born and raised in.

One of the laws of witch society states that, when a witch turns fifteen, she must spend two years journeying the world. This rule was implemented in order to broaden the scope of these young witches.

The term "witch" refers to all women who possess the special powers of magic. Their defining feature is the red eyes that they are born with. Witches had never been populous in any era, but in the present day, there were fewer than a dozen. This was because even if a witch had a child with a human, that child was not guaranteed to be a witch. Many thought that the number of witches would simply continue to drop of its own accord.

Cecily's father, too, was just a regular human without any magical powers.

Receiving the news that she was to leave her family, Cecily wailed and cried as she tightly held her overprotective father, asking him to sort things out for her. Pitying his beloved daughter who had to abide by this unnecessarily cruel law, he tried to protect Cecily, but unfortunately, Greta was unbudging.

Although she was a free soul, Greta respected the rules of witch society and

cast her crying daughter from their home.

Cecily was, naturally, at a loss. After all, she was an incredibly shy and introverted witch.

Travel the world? No way. Out of the question. Talk about scary.

I wanna head back to my village where everyone I know lives...

Tears flowing from her eyes, Cecily had crossed mountains and valleys before finally ending up at her current home: a small hut located in a forest on the outskirts of the royal capital. The hut was a small, shabby thing, and had probably been used in the past by a woodcutter or a charcoal burner. However, to Cecily, it was her castle.

That wasn't all. The forest was known in the capital for being deep and treacherous, which meant that there wouldn't be any unwelcome visitors. Living without the fear of running into anyone unexpectedly was any introvert's biggest dream.

Cecily had cleaned up the hut and spent her time making and bringing in furniture, eventually transforming the inside into an amenable space.

As for Rolo, he was a gift from her mother, meant to appease a crying daughter.

On that first night after being cast from her home, Cecily had curled up inside the hollow space of a tree and cried herself to sleep while clutching Rolo close. Even now, she experienced similarly cold and dark nights.

After finishing her breakfast, Cecily carefully brushed her teeth and got ready to head out. Changing out of her nightwear into a pinafore, Cecily stood in front of her dresser to brush her hair. As she did so, she suddenly remembered to apply her eye drops. These were special, magical eye drops, prepared by Cecily herself, that changed the color of her eyes.

Greta had taught Cecily a number of potion recipes, but the only one that Cecily made on a regular basis was the eye drop concoction. As she blinked, her red eyes gradually softened into a flaxen color—a disguise to protect her from harm.

After checking her reflection in the mirror, Cecily was ready to go.

This was another of the witches' rules: Whenever heading out into company where witches are not present, a witch must alter the color of her eyes. If not, there will be no end to the influx of people who desire her potions for selfish reasons. Really, it was a rule designed for self-protection.

Indeed, the potions made by witches had a vast array of different effects and benefits. Potions to change one's hair and eye color. Potions that granted a full stomach. Potions that made your skin silky smooth, and your hair luscious and thick.

And of course, love potions.

The worst, most nefarious of potions, with the ability to alter a person's very heart. This type of potion was used by wicked people in so many of Cecily's stories, but she was sure she would never create one herself.

Just as she was about to leave, she glanced at the knife marks carved in her wall. She had made these scratches every day so that she would not forget how long it had been since she'd been forced to leave her home. Emotion welled up in her chest as she stroked the engravings.

"A year and a bit left now..."

Her return home was still a long way off.

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Cecily began her journey down out of the thick forest of trees where her home was. A fresh breeze was blowing through the early-summer woods. The sunlight filtering through the canopy above was gentle, the temperature perfect.

Rolo skillfully avoided tree roots as he guided the way, occasionally looking back or stopping to scratch himself with his hind paws. Cecily puffed and panted as she followed behind.

Today, Cecily was wearing a black hood over her charming outfit. She often wore a hood to avoid catching anyone's eye. As many introverts who aren't so good with people know, making eye contact is a very tall order.

Cecily was unable to easily put her thoughts into words, and when she spoke to someone, her voice often came out as nothing more than a whisper. Her expression was always awkward, and she refrained from smiling much.

As the trees along the path grew sparse, a castle with its high spires came into view. An undeniable jealousy seeped into Cecily's heart as those distant white walls filled her vision.

"I know that behind those walls a wonderful prince and princess are living happily together."

Cecily clapped her hands to her cheeks to bring herself out of such idle daydreams. She was only here to do some shopping in the castle town. She would never in her life have a chance to enter the nobles' residential district, let alone the castle where the royal family lived.

For a witch like Cecily, the world of fairy tales would be forever out of reach.

As the sounds of children playing grew louder, Cecily spoke to Rolo, who was at her feet.

"All right, Rolo. Let's meet up back here when the noon bell rings, okay?"

Rolo let out a bored meow in response to these words he'd heard countless times before. He clambered up a nearby house's shed before leaping across rooftops and out of sight.

Cecily presumed he was off to see some of the town's resident cats and strays. Rolo was a smart cat, so Cecily had no reason to worry about him.

If there's anyone I ought to worry about, it's me...

Cecily journeyed down to the castle town once a week in order to restock her food and other daily essentials, but regardless, to her it was a nerve-racking ordeal. She took a few deep breaths before steeling her resolve and walking towards the city.

Carza, the royal capital of the Carzenia Kingdom. This city, enclosed within its high walls, was the trade center of Carzenia. Trade vessels entered the grand port almost every day, the high street buzzed with merchants selling their goods, and the city was full of the laughter of children.

It would have been easy to think that a bustling city like this wasn't suitable for a loner like Cecily, but she knew what would happen were she to live in a smaller town.

An outsider like me would stand out far more in a small village.

A young woman like Cecily living on her own in a small town somewhere would draw unwanted attention from the other residents, who would no doubt wonder what circumstances had led to her living alone. In the huge royal capital, however, Cecily's existence was far more insignificant.

With her hood fixed over her face, Cecily stepped through the city gates and into the city proper.

First up was selling the medicinal herbs and vegetables she grew in the allotment behind the house to lighten her load. It would be impossible for her to use all of it by herself, after all. Unfortunately, selling her produce in the city meant having to talk to people. Due to this, Cecily preferred to sell in bulk to popular cafeterias and pharmacists so as to avoid any unnecessary conversation, despite the fact that it would sell for less.

Today, too, Cecily sold her vegetables to a cafeteria that was a regular client of hers, and sold her medicinal herbs to a pharmacy. Among Cecily's medicinal herbs were those that she had foraged from the forest, which were valuable because they couldn't be cultivated. Through carefully cleaning the foraged herbs and drying them herself before selling them, she had begun to develop a reputation for delivering high-quality goods.

Putting away the small number of copper coins she'd earned from her sales, Cecily let out a satisfied sigh.

Her meager savings had long since run dry, and the money from these sales were the only thing that kept her going. Rolo was a bit of a greedy cat, but because she lived alone, if she was careful, she could just about get by.

Checking her shopping list, Cecily turned towards the bakery and butcher's shop afterwards. It was just as she had almost finished that she realized something.

I need to reapply my eye drops.

The efficacy of her magical eye drops differed from day to day, but they usually lasted about three to three-and-a-half hours. It was about time to apply another dose. Greta's own concoction was powerful enough to require only two applications per day, but Cecily was still a witch in training, so she couldn't create something that strong yet.

She rifled through her leather bag, then paused in confusion.

"That's weird..."

As a wave of anxiety passed over her, she headed to the side of the road and practically emptied out her bag, but she couldn't find it.

"My eye drops aren't here."

Cecily couldn't believe it.

She cast her mind back to that morning. She'd probably left the bottle on the shelf after applying them. Which meant that she hadn't dropped the bottle somewhere in the city, but had simply not brought it with her to start with.

"Ugh... This is the worst."

Cecily felt a sudden wave of exhaustion at her silly mistake, but it would take far too long to head home, retrieve her eye drops, and then return to the city. Rather, it would be far more efficient to put in the extra effort today and try and wrap up the last of her shopping as soon as she could.

I've only got one store left anyway. I'm sure it'll be fine.

She had no clue just how foolish this optimism would turn out to be.

Cecily had entered a small store of knickknacks on the outskirts of the city and was perusing a shelf of buttons. She'd lost the button on her coat sleeve, and was searching for a similar replacement. Soon enough, she found something suitable and sighed with relief. It was at that moment that someone cried out...

"Where is it? The fabric I put out earlier is gone!"

A shiver ran down Cecily's spine.

Nervously peering over at the source of the shouting, she saw a middle-aged

woman who was most likely the store owner making a scene.

“I’d just restocked it! I can’t believe this. That stuff wasn’t cheap!”

All that Cecily could piece together was that the owner seemed to have misplaced some stock. And right at that moment, she locked eyes with the furious woman.

“Don’t you dare move a single step.”

Having been addressed directly, it was all Cecily could do to nod, her face frozen in fear.

Drawn in by the commotion, a number of passersby gathered round to see what was afoot. The crowd which was forming sealed off the only way out. Pulling her hood further down over her face, all Cecily could do was stand still in the corner of the store.

As she peered out from below the rim of her hood, she saw that there was one other customer in the store apart from herself. The store owner glared at them both, one after the other.

“As you may have heard, some valuable fabric has gone missing. I’d placed it here, but now it’s gone. Do you know where it might be?”

The owner may have phrased this query as a question, but it was clear from the suspicion in her tone and from her expression that she was sure the perpetrator was standing right in front of her eyes. They were the only ones in the store, so it was a natural conclusion to come to. Cecily felt the stares of the crowd fall on her and the other customer. It was as if their eyes were roaming all over her body. Cecily couldn’t help but pull her shoulders into herself.

“I didn’t take a thing!”

But then, hearing the other customer practically shout in anger, Cecily realized her mistake. If she remained silent, others would think she had something to hide. Indeed, the crowd were starting to view the silent Cecily with growing suspicion.

“I d-didn’t take anything...either,” Cecily said. However, her faltering voice was so quiet that no one heard her. As the pressure of the unrelenting stares on

her grew, a painful chill ran down her spine.

What do I do? At this rate, they'll pin the crime on me even though they have no proof...

"Look at her eyes!"

Hearing a voice from the entrance, Cecily instinctively looked up. The onlookers all stared at her. As she wondered what it was they were looking at, her breath caught in her throat.

A mirror on a nearby shelf reflected Cecily's face—along with her red eyes.

The eye drops wore off!

Cecily tried to hide her face, but it was already too late.

"She's got red eyes!"

"Is she a witch?"

The crowd bubbled with curious voices.

Feeling all the stares focus not on the other man but now on her, Cecily pulled her hood down as low as it would go. She tried to ignore them, but it was impossible.

"Filthy creature. What's a red-eyed witch doing in our fair city?"

An old woman had come forward from the crowd, pointing at Cecily as she uttered these derisive words.

"Us older folks know the truth. Witches are tricksy creatures who can concoct a whole manner of foul potions. I bet that witch used a potion to magic the fabric away!"

Hearing the old woman's decisive tone, the crowd murmured and exchanged glances, wondering to each other if such a thing was possible.

The hands gripping her hood felt cold as ice. Cecily couldn't help but bite down on her lower lip in anxiety.

I've never seen or even heard of a potion that can do that!

"This woman's making up stories and simply trying to frame me!"

She wanted to say this, but her throat felt tight and the words wouldn't come out. Perhaps due to her silence, the crowd began to chatter among themselves.

No! I didn't take anything!

Yes, it was true that there were stories about a bad witch who had long ago tricked the royal family and caused chaos in the kingdom, but witches didn't do such cruel things anymore. Witches now lived in small settlements across the land and lived in peace, and this included the village where Cecily had grown up. However, it seemed that the older generation still held discriminatory views towards witches.

Does anyone deserve this treatment just because they're a witch? It's far too cruel!

Cecily wanted to shout back at them...but she'd felt the same about witches when she was a little girl herself.

Back in those days, when she was a happy young girl who didn't know about her true identity, she often spoke badly of witches, believing them to be crafty and cruel. Whenever her storybooks ended with the wicked witch getting her just deserts, she'd clap her hands with joy.

But, unlike the witches in her stories, Cecily hadn't harmed a single person. She simply lived in peace deep in the forest where no one would dare to venture, trying not to get in anyone's way. To be treated like this despite that was too much for her.

I'm not the thief!

She screamed this in her heart. However, no one could hear her silent cry.

Just as tears were about to fall from those large eyes of hers, someone else spoke up...

"She may be a witch, but that's no proof in and of itself."

The voice wasn't particularly loud, yet it cut through the tumult and reached the ears of everyone present. Before this low voice, the crowd fell completely silent.

"S-Sir!" the store owner said, bowing her head in respect.

Cecily couldn’t help but look up, though her face remained hidden by the hood.

Standing by the entrance was a tall gentleman dressed in a knight’s uniform, his arms crossed.

His short hair, slicked back with oil, was an obsidian color deeper than the darkest night. His wheat-colored skin and hazel eyes made him stand out from the rest of the crowd. Judging from his appearance, the knight most likely had roots in the south. However, his demeanor was the most striking thing about him. Despite every single pair of eyes in the crowd being focused on him, the young man stood undaunted, not flinching in the slightest.

As soon as his eyes settled on the store owner, her shoulders began to tremble. The knight possessed a rare kind of beauty, but his expression was nothing if not fierce, and his presence had a tremendous weight to it.

“There’s something I want to ask you. Why did you begin this affair with accusations?”

“I-I don’t see what you mean, sir.”

“I don’t know what kind of fabric this prize product of yours is, but it must have been quite sizable, no? Wouldn’t it have been faster to investigate the belongings of these two before making accusations?”

The knight glanced over at Cecily. In a panic, she took off her leather bag and opened it for the owner to see. Inside was bread, dried meat, spices, and other foodstuffs. It was clear the fabric was not within.

“I-I didn’t take it.”

After Cecily did this, the other suspect turned out his pockets. Naturally, they were empty, and he didn’t even have a bag on him.

“W-Well, isn’t it what that woman was saying earlier? This girl probably used a potion while in the store to hide the fabric because she realized she was going to get caught.”

“That’s quite possible. I mean, I don’t know much about witches, so maybe she could have done this,” the young man replied. It shocked Cecily how easily

he agreed. “That being said, I have another question. When was this fabric brought into the storefront, and by whom?”

“Excuse me?”

“I think that the frightened expression of the person who was meant to have brought it out is all the answer we need.”

Everyone in the crowd followed the knight’s gaze. Standing there by the owner was a man who was shaking all over.

“I-I’m so sorry,” this man said. “By the time I came back from the privy, all this commotion was happening. There wasn’t really a chance for me to say anything. The, um, the fabric is still in the back of the store.”

It was precisely this sort of situation for which the word “dumbfounded” was invented.

The store owner’s long sigh finally broke the silence.

“I can’t believe you...”

“I’m sorry!”

In the end, it turned out that the owner had been making a huge scene about some fabric that had never gone missing at all. Willing to acknowledge her mistake, she turned and bowed in apology to Cecily and the other customer.

“Um, I’m sorry for suspecting you without proof. I hope you forgive me.”

Cecily didn’t say anything, but the other customer left in a huff. Soon, the crowd of onlookers had dispersed as well.

The owner made one last attempt at kindness to Cecily, who remained dumbstruck.

“I know! If you like, you can have that button free of charge.”

“Right...” was all the reply that Cecily could muster.

How easy it was for this woman to use this button to purchase Cecily’s forgiveness. However, it wouldn’t have been right to decline, so Cecily simply bowed her head in thanks.

As she turned to exit the store, a fluttering overcoat caught her eye. It was

the knight who had resolved this affair so gallantly. Before she could even think about what she was doing, she chased after his tall, departing silhouette.

“Excuse me!”

Upon hearing her voice, he immediately stopped.

“Yes?”

As he turned around, his eyes showed no traces of kindness, and his voice was cold. All the same, this man, whose name Cecily didn’t even know, had saved her. If he hadn’t shown up, she would’ve been falsely accused, branded as a criminal, and turned in to the local guard.

I just want to thank him, but no words are coming out...

As Cecily’s mouth simply opened and closed in silence, she felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“I-I’m sorry.”

As soon as the tears began to flow, she couldn’t stop them.

I didn’t mean to start crying in front of him.

Was it because she was ashamed by the fact that she couldn’t even say a simple thank you to the man who’d saved her? Or was it from the relief she felt at being proven innocent? Unsure as to why she was even crying, she dropped her head and wiped at the tears with the back of her hand. However, the tears simply flowed ever faster.

He’s going to think I’m weird...

Cecily tried to calm her voice, but she still couldn’t speak. As her head filled with panic, she noticed something being held out to her.

What is it?

It was a clean, white handkerchief.

What did this mean? She slowly raised her head and saw the young man looking at her. He was leaning over in front of her with a furrow in his brow. Maybe he was tired of this girl who fell into tears so easily.

“You don’t need to force yourself to stop crying.”

His response was completely unexpected.

The knight gestured with the handkerchief again in front of Cecily, who was still in a daze. Finally comprehending that he wanted her to take it, Cecily grasped it by a corner. Calmed by its softness, she dabbed at her wet eyes.



From above her head, she heard a deep, sympathetic voice.

“That was scary, huh? It’s fine now, though.”

Cecily could only sniffle in response.

His words were like a spell that sought to console her pain.

The crowd had discriminated against her just because she was a witch, and this had led to everyone misunderstanding the truth of the situation. Despite that, she felt that this young man alone had looked at her for who she was.

I need to say something. I need to thank him.

Thank you for so gallantly saving me. Thank you for this handkerchief. Thank you for your words of kindness. She needed to say something.

Her tears had finally stopped. With this thought in her chest, she plucked up her courage and raised her head.

“I...”

However, it was too late. The young man was already gone.

Cecily glanced around, but didn’t spot his tall figure among the crowd. Suddenly drained of energy, she let out a sigh. However, the handkerchief in her hand told her that what occurred over that past minute hadn’t simply been a dream.

Her heart was racing, and she couldn’t ignore the feeling that had settled deep in her chest. She stroked the handkerchief—a treasure.

“He was so kind.”

He was a bit different from the prince atop a white horse she had long dreamed of meeting. He was blunt, a bit gruff, and hadn’t smiled even once. But he was more incredible than anyone she’d ever met before.

“He really was like a prince...”

And so, the witch had fallen in love with the knight.

Chapter 2: The Love Potion

The next day came.

Cecily rose early without Rolo's help, ate her breakfast, cleaned her room, and organized her things.

Standing in front of her full-length mirror, she struggled with her hair.

"It's not going how I want it to..."

Her fingers were charged with an anxious energy which had nowhere to go. She struggled to tie her favorite ribbon into her hair, the restlessness of her hands making it impossible to get it to look right no matter how much she tried.

Rolo let out a dubious meow as he walked at her feet.

As Cecily let out a sigh, the hair she had tied up fell apart in tresses. She couldn't leave it like this—people would think of her as a complete weirdo. She picked up the brush and tidied up her hair once again.

Almost ready to leave, she applied her eyedrops. She checked her appearance from all angles with her now flaxen eyes, then pulled her hood down as she set off. Her hair was still a mess, but Cecily was still so full of nervous excitement from the previous day that she paid it no mind.

"I wonder if that knight will be in the castle town again today..."

She was nervous, it was true, but the furious beating of her heart was a sweet and lovely thing too. She had made sure that she had included the knight's handkerchief, which she carefully washed the day before, in her bag. Ostensibly, her reason for going was to simply return this borrowed handkerchief. And her real reason was to say thank you to the knight.

But there was a second real reason which had also settled deep within her heart: she wanted to see him again.

Cecily had finished her weekly chores on yesterday's trip, but she resolved to head to the city for the purpose of meeting him again.

Hmm, this makes me feel a little bit like a stalker...

She shook her head furiously to rid herself of this thought.

No! I just want to thank him properly.

Telling herself that this reason was more prominent than the other, she finally set off.

“Rolo, I’m heading to the city. What are you going to do?”

She called out to Rolo, but her cat simply sat on the window ledge swinging his tail, showing no desire to come with her. Cats follow their own whims, so this didn’t surprise her much.

She filled his bowl with fresh water and gave him a stroke before she left. His eyes closed in pleasure as he nuzzled his head into her hand.

“Okay, I’m off now, so take care of the place while I’m gone.”

With that, her second trip to the city in two days began.

Today, too, the city was buzzing with life.

Cecily was a little worried about whether rumors were spreading about her, but she didn’t appear to draw any unwanted attention from the crowds.

“Now where would he be...?”

Out on the high street, Cecily looked around, becoming aware of a major flaw in her plan.

I don’t even know his name...

Maybe Cecily had been buoyed by the chance nature of their encounter yesterday, because she had imagined she would bump into him if she simply came to the city. But the royal capital was a huge place—this hope was obviously misplaced.

Is just walking about and hoping I run into him all I can do?

Just as this thought crossed her mind, she noticed something at the corner of her vision.

“Ah!”

It was a striking gold aiguillette attached to a refined blue uniform.

This man was blond, which meant he wasn't her knight from yesterday, but their uniforms were unmistakably the same. Most likely, the two of them belonged to the same knights' order.

Cecily plunged into the crowd. If she followed this blond knight, then she would have a greater chance of finding the knight she was actually looking for. Carefully weaving her way through the bustle, she made sure to not lose sight of him as she followed behind.

For Cecily, who was usually so reserved, this was an unimaginable act.

Her hard work paid off, however, because soon her wish was granted. The blond knight headed into one of the popular cafeterias. There weren't many customers inside, so Cecily knew she was sure to be spotted if she just followed him in through the front door like a simple and honest fool. She glanced around the side of the building and found a row of barrels situated behind it. She stood atop one of them and peered in through a small window.

Inside, she saw a certain young knight raise his hand in greeting to someone.

There he is!

Cecily's eyes were practically glittering with joy.

What do I do? Should I just head in now or wait a bit?

As she stood atop the barrel, her legs quivered with uncertainty.

It was still early, so there were no other customers sitting around the two of them yet. If he'd been on his own, she might have been brave enough to head inside, but with the owner and his friend present, she couldn't scrounge up the courage she needed.

Soon, their conversation floated out towards the window. The blond knight was bantering with his black-haired friend.

"It's pretty rare for you to come down into town two days in a row. Her Royal Highness the Fifth Princess will be sad without the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade with her, you know?"

"I know you're trying to rile me up, Alphonse. Fact is, I think Her Royal

Highness is probably happier that I'm not around."

Their words left Cecily in shock.

They're in the Celestial Knight Brigade?

Even Cecily, who knew little of the world, had heard that name before. The Celestial Knight Brigade was a knights' order belonging to the Carzenia Kingdom composed of knights who rode upon wyvern steeds. Despite being magical beasts, wyverns had been tamed by witches. They possessed incredible strength that, in times long past, allowed them to rule the skies.

The Celestial Knight Brigade had a long history within the kingdom, and their tough yet magnificent wings continued to beat on the king's behalf in order to protect their skies from all foreign foes.

As the kingdom was currently experiencing a time of peace with its neighbors, the knights' order was chiefly tasked with quelling rampant magical beasts. But even in this, they exemplified their dominance over the skies.

One of the features of the Celestial Knight Brigade was that the order wasn't divided into smaller units. Rather, it was more accurate to say that the order didn't have enough knights to be divided up into multiple units to begin with.

Knights in the order would perform ten to fifteen years of service before leaving the brigade and spending the rest of their lives caring for their wyverns, who lived far longer than humans did. Sometimes they would be commissioned to head out on rescue missions during emergencies, but apart from that they were essentially in retirement.

Riding a wyvern required incredible skill, and in order to fill any vacancies in the brigade, younger knights needed to first train their own wyverns. After all, wyverns were creatures that only opened their hearts to the person who raised them. Fierce creatures, they wouldn't hesitate to snap or kick at any who approach—apart from the one who raised them—even going so far as to cause mortal injury. Due to this, upon the death of a knight—whether it be by accident, illness, or combat—their wyvern would be released back into the wild.

In this way, wyverns and their knights had a codependent relationship. Although wyverns provided exponential power to protect the kingdom, the

Celestial Knight Brigade also shouldered many risks in working with them.

On top of this, the wyvern population was small and they were tricky creatures to raise, which meant that there were apparently only twelve knights currently working in the Celestial Knight Brigade. This group was led by their captain, who personified the military might of the kingdom—he was the elitest of the elite.

I didn't realize how incredible he was.

As Cecily watched over him with wonder, the knights' conversation continued.

"That reminds me. Cyril told me that apparently you went and saved some girl in town yesterday, huh, Zeke?"

Zeke!

The excitement nearly made Cecily fall off the barrel she was standing on. It had taken almost no effort to learn the name of the black-haired knight who had saved her. Cecily was full of gratitude to this Alphonse.

Even his name is wonderful. It's almost unfair how elegant it is...

Cecily's face reddened, and she repeated his name in her head.

Sir Zeke, Sir Zeke, Sir Zeke...

"But color me surprised. Who'd have thought that a witch lived in the royal capital?"

Alphonse's remark startled Cecily. It was clear that she was now the subject of their conversation.

From where she stood, she could only see their faces in profile, but it seemed to her that Zeke's expression had hardened somewhat.

"You haven't been spreading that around, have you?"

"Of course not. But I'm just saying it wouldn't hurt to be a bit careful, no?" Alphonse's tone was marked, emphasizing his warning. "Watch yourself, Zeke. They say witches are known to use shady potions to control people's emotions. Even someone like you wouldn't stand a chance if you drank one."

Cecily could only stand in shock as she listened to him. What he was saying wasn't as brazen as the old woman who'd pinned her as the thief in that high-pitched tone yesterday, but she couldn't help but be surprised that even someone in the Celestial Knight Brigade held discriminatory views against witches.

But...

Cecily squeezed her hands into fists.

Zeke didn't discriminate against me.

Even though he knew what Cecily was, he still held out his hand to help her as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

This might have seemed like a trivial act to some, but for a witch like Cecily, it was enough to make her fall in love.

I'm sure Zeke will rebuke him. He'll tell him that I wouldn't do such a thing.

"Got it. I'll watch out."

In an instant, Cecily's expectations were shattered. Sinking down into a sitting position atop the barrel, she was frozen in shock.

She wasn't sure how long she sat like that, but before she knew it, the sky above was starting to darken and the cries of birds announcing the coming dusk crisscrossed through the air.

The two knights had probably long since finished eating and had left. Drunken voices started to trickle out of the window from inside the bright tavern hall.

At last, Cecily stood up and stretched her taut muscles. She looked out at the evening sky, dyed in a deep orange hue.

"Fine, then. I'll do it," she whispered.

There were no tears in Cecily's eyes, which were redder than the twilight sun. Instead, a fierce resolve dwelled within them.

"If he's so scared of a witch's potions, then I'll give him a taste."

Cecily had made up her mind to create that foul brew—she would concoct a love potion.

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When she was forced to leave home, Cecily had packed her bag with various letters from her mother, Greta. After all, she couldn't know which potions would prove to be useful in her two years away.

However, perhaps due to a trick of fate, among these letters was one that she didn't remember packing away: the recipe for a love potion.

She should have ripped it up the moment she found it, but she didn't. She could barely lay her eyes upon it, and had instead sealed it away in the depths of her wardrobe.

Today, that seal was broken.

"Mom's handwriting... It really reminds me of her."

Tracing the lines of ink with her finger, Cecily let out a deep sigh.

It felt almost as if Greta had a premonition that this day would come. As if she could see what Cecily's future would hold, she had slipped this one recipe into the bag of her departing daughter, waiting for the day it would be used.

And now, this recipe was a source of hope for Cecily.

Readying herself, she began to read it, beginning with its ingredients.

"Okay, first up, I'm going to need green-rooted medicinal herbs."

She was lucky. Although a love potion required a lot of different ingredients, she actually had most of them already.

After all, Cecily had her own allotment where she grew a number of herbs. She did have some trouble with the mandrakes she grew in the corner of the allotment, but this was easily solved with a pair of earplugs.

"Right, next..."

Cecily was quick to realize just how naive she had been—the next line made her voice catch in her throat.

"I'll need...the fresh blood of an amorous toad!"

The recipe suddenly demanded way too much of her. She couldn't believe what she was reading.

"The fresh blood of a toad?!"

She was so shocked she repeated the words to herself. Convinced that this must be a mistake, she read on.

"The hair of the concocter—one thousand hairs, from tip to root."

That was way too many hairs. And plucking that many would be far too painful. Cecily felt she had damaged her scalp just by reading that line of the recipe.

"I'll also need the tail of a pink lizard? Lake water that has been thrice blessed by the full moon's glow? The fresh blood of the concocter?!"

Why did a love potion require so much blood? Cecily couldn't help but shake with the ridiculousness of the recipe's demands.

Hold on just a second. Someone has to drink this! Is it meant to be some kind of punishment? Meant to gross them out?

It was far too cruel to force Zeke to drink such a disgusting concoction. Wait—it was far too cruel to even toy with the idea of controlling his heart in the first place.

But it was also too cruel to drain a little toad of its blood, to part a lizard from its tail, and Cecily felt sick simply thinking about drinking water that had been stagnating for three straight months. Above all, it was absolutely a disgusting proposition to suggest drinking something that had so much human hair in it.

To top it off, the idea of putting your own blood into such a thing wasn't just cruel—it was totally irrational. Plus, obtaining the blood was bound to hurt.

By this point, Cecily had long since exceeded her ability to stomach grossness.

"Rolo!"

No longer able to bear it, she called for her cat. Rolo simply looked down from the catwalk Cecily had constructed using slats of wood.

Cecily entreated him, pleading, "Now, Rolo. Would you be a good dear and

fetch me fresh blood from a toad and the tail of a lizard?”

This was perhaps a bit too difficult a request for a young woman to make of her cat. Rolo simply answered her with a yawn, and the only sound was the creaking of the catwalk under her portly cat’s weight.

“P-Please, my darling Rolo! I’m begging you! I’ll make you a feast tonight, so please get these ingredients for me.”

Continuing to ignore Cecily imploring him, Rolo curled up into a ball. It seemed he had no intention of helping. What an ungrateful cat.

“Hmm... Can’t I substitute some of the ingredients?”

Too grossed out by the recipe, Cecily now pondered whether certain compromises could be made.

“Yeah, I don’t see why not! I don’t like to admit it, but at the end of the day I’m still a witch. I’m sure if I put my absolute everything into it, I can make something that’s close enough to a love potion,” she announced aloud, to pump herself up.

Her motivation returning to her, she set about gathering substitutes for the ingredients she didn’t want to use.

Instead of toad’s blood, she could use ripe tomatoes. Instead of a lizard’s tail, she could use the end of a burdock root. Instead of lake water blessed thrice by the full moon, she could use water from a vase.

Instead of her hair, she could use thin strands from a hemp rope. Instead of her own blood, she could use fresh tomatoes.

“This is perfect.”

Cecily’s heart swelled at her own genius.

Having gathered all the required ingredients, she headed to her workshop. This was an area for concocting potions, separate from her kitchen. Cecily had converted it from a small storehouse, and was proud of it.

Upon arriving at her beloved workshop, Cecily sloshed the water from the vase into the cauldron and lit the fire beneath it. Next, she threw in the chopped and decocted herbs and other ingredients. Of course, this included the

tomatoes and the burdock root. Then, when the heat was stable, Cecily set about stirring the cauldron with a large stirrer.

If a normal person had simply mixed together this concoction of disgusting ingredients, then they would simply end up with an equally disgusting slop.

However, Cecily was a witch. Witches are capable of pouring their magical powers into their potions while concocting them in order to grant them special properties.

Cecily grunted with effort.

She imagined her magical powers focusing within her fingertips. As she concentrated, her red eyes started to glitter like rubies. Large droplets of sweat started to form on her brow, but she remained strong and kept on battling with the potion.

“I decided to do this. I need to see it through.”

Cecily’s main driving force was frustration.

She was angry. She was upset. She was frustrated.

In situations like these, Cecily would usually cry herself to sleep and carry the memory in her heart for ten years or so before finally forgetting about it. However, the despair of having her expectations betrayed like this had left a far deeper wound.

Maybe I’ll be allowed to find the kind of love I read about in those fairy tales. Maybe I’ll find a prince to be with. Cecily had been so won over by Zeke that she had begun to think that these desires might actually be realized.

As she brewed her potion, the strands of rope caught fire; the tomatoes burst and splattered on her face. Despite these incidents, at the end of Cecily’s struggle that couldn’t be captured in words...

“It’s done! I did it!”

Cecily cheered in jubilation.

After cooling the potion down, she then transferred it to a bottle. Looking at it, she saw that the liquid didn’t have anything floating about in it. It was a shockingly vibrant red.

Yes—Cecily's own original love potion was complete.

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The next evening...

Cecily hurried towards the city with the love potion—if it could be called that—in hand, her head full of worries.

A love potion wasn't something you could test for yourself, and Rolo wouldn't have dared take a drop of this poisonous-looking liquid either.

She felt bad for Zeke, but her only option was to force him to drink it without any prior testing.

But that was fine. Cecily's worries were elsewhere.

"How can I get him to drink this without him suspecting me...?"

Specifically, she was worrying about how she would get Zeke to actually drink the potion. He was the captain of the knights' order, so it was natural to assume he would be wary of what he consumed. Would he really drink it if she simply told him that it was thanks for helping her the other day?

"No... He wouldn't drink it so easily."

Cecily smirked self-deprecatingly. After all, to Zeke she was simply a witch that deserved suspicion. If a witch like her handed him a potion and said "Drink it," then it would only be natural for him to instantly turn her down.

"Maybe I could invite him to dinner and mix it into his drink?" She paused. "No, I don't have the sleight of hand required for that."

Cecily muttered to herself as she trekked towards the city. Freaked out by her, passersby avoided her and stepped out of the way, but Cecily didn't notice them in the slightest.

"I mean, I don't even know how to arrange a meeting with him."

Zeke belonged to the Celestial Knight Brigade, so it was feasible to assume that she would meet him if she went to the castle. However, Cecily was a simple

commoner—her social standing was far too low for her to be allowed into the royal palace. Her only option was to try and find him again in the city.

“That said, I doubt something so lucky would happen agai— Wah!”

Cecily let out a small cry as a passerby bumped into her left shoulder.

Losing her balance, Cecily was about to fall over when their sturdy body caught her and set her straight.

“I-I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Cecily apologized as she looked up at the person who had caught her...and could only gulp in surprise.

The person who had caught Cecily by the shoulder was none other than Zeke.

Lucky things do happen!

It was almost as if the goddess of fortune was on Cecily’s side.

Cecily’s expression was frozen in silent surprise, so Zeke quickly removed his hand. However, he didn’t move to leave.

The glow around Zeke’s silhouette from the light behind him was surely nothing more than an illusion.

“We meet again.”

Cecily’s eyes widened at this single sentence.

“Y-You remember me?”

“Of course. From the knickknack shop.”

He remembered me!

The joy from this minor event left Cecily tongue-tied.

I can’t let my heart start racing at something so trivial!

Right now, Cecily was a witch fueled by revenge. He had played with her heart and had cruelly let her down. And she had vowed to make him drink this love potion.

Zeke was peering down at her with those hazel eyes of his. She stared back—at his nose—as she asked of him in a quivering voice.

“Do you, um, want to perhaps maybe go for dinner?”

That was way too direct!

When she had practiced what she was going to say in her head beforehand, she had imagined herself easing into the topic with some nonchalant small talk first! She’d meant to say something natural like, *“Oh, have you eaten yet, by the way?”*

I can’t be too hard on myself... I’ve never asked a guy out to dinner before.

Cecily’s vision went blurry with stress as she tapped her index fingers together as if she were knitting. Anyone watching would have been suspicious of her right now, but that wasn’t what she was worrying about.

What does Zeke think of me?

Feeling as if her furiously pounding heart was going to crush her from the inside, she peered up at him.

“Hm? Dinner?”

As expected, his eyes were wide in surprise.

Cecily could already feel a twinge of disappointment, but she knew that if he turned her down here, she would never get another chance to get him to drink the love potion. She needed to get him to agree to go with her, no matter what.

“I-I’ll pay! So, please!”

Without a care as to how it would look, she bowed her head to implore him, attracting stares from passersby.

Perhaps made uncomfortable by the attention, Zeke said, with some urgency in his voice, “Please stop that! I’ll come with you, so please, raise your head. And please allow me to pay.”

“Huh? O-Okay, but...”

“Is there anywhere you want to go? Anything you want to eat?”

As Cecily shook her head up and down and nodded it left and right, Zeke had already taken her to a restaurant near the noble district.

Compared to the popular cafeteria from before, the restaurant had a

somewhat sophisticated air to it. Still in a daze, Cecily watched as Zeke whispered something to one of the staff before they were both led upstairs to a private table.

However, there was an open atrium which gave a view of the first floor, meaning that they weren't in a completely secluded space. For Cecily, who didn't like the attention of strangers, it was perfect.

Did he choose this table for me?

As she realized this, her heart skipped a beat.

I said stop racing, stupid heart!

Cecily couldn't help but react each time Zeke showed her kindness.

Perhaps unsure of what to do with her, Zeke pulled out a chair for her and urged her to sit down. Again, her heart skipped another beat. Every time she thought she was getting somewhere with her feelings, she was won over again.

Despite the extra time it took, they finally settled down at the table, facing one another.

Zeke let out a polite cough.

"Oh, right, I still haven't introduced myself properly. My name is Zeke Stein. I'm the captain of a group of knights called the Celestial Knight Brigade."

"I..."

"...know," is what she couldn't say.

Instead, she bobbed her head politely.

"M-My name's Cecily."

"Cecily, huh? A good name you've got there."

Cecily's chest filled with a wave of warmth.

I told you to stop losing it over every little thing!

As Cecily trembled in annoyance at herself, she heard the burbling of liquid. It was the love potion in her bag.

That's right. I need to somehow force him to drink this love potion during this

meal!

Totally unaware of the resolve burning within Cecily, Zeke pointed at the menu.

“Would you be happy with some fruit-infused water? If you’d prefer something alcoholic, we can get that too.”

In the Carzenia Kingdom, you became an adult at the age of sixteen. And when it came to witches, many of them could hold their drink as they often tested whole ranges of different potions on themselves. However, Cecily wasn’t a fan of the taste of alcohol. She would much prefer some water that had been flavored by freshly squeezed citrus fruits.

“I’m happy with the fruit-infused water. How about you, Sir Zeke?”

“Let’s see... I’ll have the same.” Upon seeing Cecily’s confusion, he continued. “I don’t intend to drink booze when I’m alone with a woman.”

Cecily’s gasp was almost audible. Was the reason she was so overjoyed by this really only because she knew so little about interacting with men? Or maybe the world was full of people who were considerate around women. Cecily didn’t know.

Zeke called for a waiter and ordered the drinks as well as some simple dishes.

As they waited for the drinks to arrive, Zeke spoke again.

“Do you live in the capital, Cecily?”

“Oh, no, I live alone outside the city.”

Technically, in the forest outside the city.

Zeke’s eyes widened in surprise, but fortunately he hadn’t seen through her white lie.

“Alone? What about your parents?”

“Well, due to a particular rule of witch society, I was...thrown out of my home.”

“You were thrown out?!”

Cecily flinched in surprise at Zeke’s sudden exclamation, and seeing her fear,

Zeke clapped his hands over his mouth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay.”

It’s my fault for not giving him a full explanation.

“Um, the thing is, the rule actually states that a witch must leave her village and travel the wider world for two years once she turns fifteen. I didn’t want to leave, but that’s the rule, so I had to.”

Choosing her words carefully, Cecily explained the situation to Zeke.

“I didn’t realize that witch society had such a strict rule,” Zeke murmured to himself. He fell into silence and didn’t say anything further on the matter. Instead, he went on, “By the way, Cecily...”

Cecily panicked at his words. *This isn’t good. At this rate, he’ll be in control of the conversation.*

In fact, Zeke had long since been controlling the flow of their conversation, but Cecily couldn’t afford to let this continue lest she miss the opportunity to enact her plan. She took a deep breath and forced her mouth open.

“U-Um, erm, you must be quite popular with the ladies, Sir Zeke.”

“Excuse me?”

No matter how much she tried, the fact of the matter was that Cecily had practically zero communication skills. Her change of topic was far too sudden.

However, it seemed that Zeke had gauged from her serious expression that she wasn’t merely joking with him. He put his hand to his jaw, as if deep in thought.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had an experience where I’ve been seen as attractive to a woman.”

“What?”

Cecily couldn’t believe it. She blinked, and Zeke scratched his chin.

“I’m the third son of a merchant family. My father purchased a noble rank for our family, so on paper I’m the third son of a baron, but in all honesty I’m from

a pretty no-name family. I turned twenty this year, but unlike my brothers, I don't even have a fiancée."

Thank goodness!

Cecily quickly wiped away the smile that crept across her face.

Ignoring the way that Cecily was massaging her cheek muscles, Zeke looked off into the distance.

"The people I'm tasked with protecting get scared of me. Sometimes when I'm out on patrol, I've made women and children cry too."

"Because they're scared of you?"

"Yeah. As you can probably see, I'm not easy on the eyes whatsoever. Nothing I can do about that, though."

As he shrugged, Cecily took a hard look at him.

But he's so wonderful.

It was true that he was tall and had a gruff expression. And that his brow was constantly furrowed, as if in anger. And that he had a fierce look in his eye and a deep voice. Cecily could concede that there might have been people who were scared of the slight air of violence which seemed to follow him.

However, this was an impression that would easily vanish once you talked to him. Upon a closer look, she saw that his features were handsome—his hazel eyes were beautiful and intelligent. The words that fell from his slender lips were kind and gentlemanly.

I don't think there's anyone who's more suited to this gallant knights' uniform. Not only that...

How strange. Just like a wellspring of water, Zeke's positive traits kept popping into her head.

"I'm sorry. This is probably just making you feel awkward."

Cecily shook her head at Zeke's apology.

"I don't usually talk about this stuff with people," he added.

Zeke tilted his head, as if wondering what it was that got him talking about it.

Cecily quietly watched his well-positioned features.

He's simply surrounded by people who can't see him for who he is.

A new wave of frustration passed over her. If she hadn't been a witch but a normal young woman, then she would have simply been head over heels for him.

The pair clinked their newly arrived glasses of fruit-flavored water together.

Just as Cecily removed her lips from the glass after taking a sip, Zeke spoke.

"Can I ask something, Cecily?"

"Wh-What is it?"

"Did you come to me because you're in trouble of some sort?"

This line was the nail in the coffin.

Taken by surprise, all Cecily could do was nod as tears started to well up in her eyes.

She finally realized why Zeke had accepted an invitation from a woman—a witch—that he barely knew without doubt or hesitation in his heart. He had thought that Cecily perhaps had something she wanted to tell him that she couldn't say in public, which is why he had gone to the effort of setting up this private table for them.

He truly is kind.

Cecily realized then and there that she couldn't force a good person like this to drink such a cowardly concoction.

She had been buoyed by a wave of passion, and by her desire for revenge, when she had concocted the potion, but the truth of the matter was that Zeke had done nothing wrong. It was Cecily's fault for searching for him, eavesdropping on him, and being shocked by what she then heard.

If she had simply been content to hold the memories of his gallant rescue at the knickknack store in her heart, then she wouldn't have gotten into this situation. It was Cecily who had created this situation for herself.

I won't do it.

She clutched her bag as she came to this decision.

However, it seemed that by chance the inside of the bag was visible. Zeke tilted his head to get a better look.

“What’s that?”

“It was something I was going to give you.”

Cecily took the bottle out and laughed foolishly. Incapable of laughing sweetly, she could only let out spineless chuckles, which she did now.

“But forget about it. I decided to throw it away.”

“Throw it away? Why? That seems like a waste.”

“No, it wouldn’t be a— Huh?”

Cecily froze.

Why? Because Zeke had stood up and then gotten down on one knee in front of her.

Almost as if he were a knight swearing his fealty to her.

Cecily’s cheeks flushed red. Whether he had noticed this or not, Zeke took one of Cecily’s hands and planted a kiss upon it. Her slender shoulders shot up in surprise.

“This is the first time in my life that a woman has given me a gift. Please, don’t say you want to throw it away.”

Cecily let out a small shriek of surprise. As he looked at her with his damp hazel eyes, she could not refuse him. She wondered what had come over Zeke. He had been so logical until this moment, and yet now he was acting as if he’d lost all self-control.

As Cecily puzzled over the situation, a young waiter came rushing up the stairs.

“Sir, my deepest apologies! It seems like I brought you a glass of fruit cider, not the fruit-infused water!”

“Oh no...”

Cecily took Zeke's glass and sniffed it.

Yes—unlike Cecily's drink, his glass smelled of alcohol. Although it didn't appear to be all that strong.

So, is Zeke drunk right now?

With this knowledge, she felt that although he was as expressionless as ever, his cheeks did appear to be slightly flushed. Maybe he was the type who was susceptible to a little liquid courage.

But now wasn't the time to be calmly analyzing the situation.

"Hmm—is this perhaps some sort of fermented liquor? It has an odor—uh, a fragrance that I've never smelled before."

The bottle that had been in her hand was now in Zeke's.

"W-Wait a second, Sir Zeke!"

Cecily was panicking.

"Oh no! What do we do?"

For some reason, the waiter was also panicking.

"Now then, I'll enjoy this gift right here and now."

"No—you can't, Sir Zeke! It's dangerous, so please don't—"

Cecily wasn't able to finish her sentence. Zeke had taken the top off the bottle and started to drink it.

No... I don't believe it!

His manly throat was moving as he swallowed the deadly-looking red liquid.

He's drinking it. Zeke's drinking the love potion. The love potion that I made.

She didn't have the time to stop him. Cecily and the waiter looked on with mouths agape, only capable of waiting until he had finished this wild act. And while they watched, Zeke finished every last drop of the love potion.

"Urk?!"

Almost at once, something happened. Zeke let out a groan, then tumbled to the ground without breaking his fall.

“Sir Zeke!”

Cecily rushed over to Zeke, almost kicking a chair out of the way, and squatted down to check on him. It seemed that he was simply unconscious.

“Sh-Should we call for someone? Maybe?”

The waiter was practically in tears, but it was Cecily who wanted to cry.

Zeke’s eyelids fluttered.

“Sir Zeke?”

She called his name in a quivering voice.

Before long, Zeke gently opened his hazel eyes. They seemed lost for a moment, but when they settled upon Cecily, he lifted himself up, one hand supporting his head.

“A-Are you okay?”

Cecily reached out her arm and helped him up.

As he stood up, Zeke looked at Cecily with narrowed eyes, as though glaring at her. She wondered if the potion had been successful, but it seemed that Zeke didn’t harbor any feelings of love for her yet.

Was my potion a failure?

If so, then that was fine. She would apologize for making him drink that mysterious liquid, and things would all be wrapped up nicely.

However, Zeke continued to stare at Cecily. Just as she was starting to feel awkward, he reached out a hand and touched it softly to her cheek.

Her shoulders shook—she had never been touched like this by a man before.

“I...”

And then, to a nervous and trembling Cecily...

She was sure, he said these next words:

“So pretty.”

“What?!”

Cecily came back to her senses. The shock of what he said had caused her to black out for a moment.

Zeke was waiting patiently in front of her. With trembling lips, she asked him, “Um, wh-what did you say just now?”

It was obvious—she must have misheard him due to a desire to hear what she wanted to hear. Or so she thought, but Zeke repeated what he said without any hesitation.

“I said you looked very pretty.”

Shock number one.

“After all, you’re too pretty not to say so.”

Shock number two.

Two consecutive blows to the heart. However, Cecily couldn’t let herself be fooled.

“Wh-When you say ‘you,’ wh-who do you mean?”

No. She couldn’t yet be certain. She needed to be absolutely sure whether the potion had worked.

Zeke tilted his head in confusion at Cecily’s remark.

“By you, I mean you, Cecily. Who else is there?”

Oh...my...

Cecily glanced over at the waiter.

He must have heard what Zeke said. He nodded fiercely at her.

However, even with this third party’s assurance, the deeply untrusting Cecily still couldn’t believe it.

She lifted a finger as she asked again.

“C-C-Could you say that once more?”

“Cecily?”

“Again!”

Maybe Cecily's intensity was odd, but Zeke merely smiled.

This was the first time she'd seen him smile, his hazel eyes crinkling at the edges. Under his stare, her heart raced ever faster.

"Of course. I'll say it as many times as you like."

Zeke's large hand held Cecily's cheek as he drew her closer. And then, as if appeasing a needy lover, he whispered into Cecily's ear playfully.

"Cecily, you're pretty."

This was the first time this had ever happened in Cecily Ramps's entire existence. The first time a man other than her father had called her name without any formalities at all.

The first time a man other than her father had called her pretty.

It didn't bear saying that it was also the first time someone had whispered in her ear so sensually before.

"A-Am I really pretty?"

"Yes, you are."

Cecily let out a sigh as she felt her strength leave her. Zeke pulled her close. Meanwhile, nervously watching this scene, the waiter plucked up the courage to call out.

"Um, should I call a doctor?"

"A doctor? And why would we need a doctor?"

Faced with a glare that could kill, the waiter shrunk back in fear.

"Do you have an objection to the fact that my Cecily is the most beautiful woman in the world?"

"S-S-So sorry, sir, I had no intention of suggesting that! I was merely wondering whether you should see a doctor, since you hit your head."

It was a logical conclusion. However, it wasn't due to hitting his head that Zeke was suffering from a temporary bout of strangeness—rather, he had become like this due to the love potion.

However, Zeke didn’t seem impressed with the waiter’s remark. Cecily couldn’t sit idly by and so called out to him.

“Sir Zeke, please stop this!”

“Sir Zeke?” he repeated, a puzzled look on his face.

Had Cecily said something to offend him? She grew uneasy, but in the next moment Zeke’s expression softened.

“I thought we agreed you could call me Zeke.”

We did?! That was news to her. However, Zeke’s expression indicated that he wouldn’t be happy unless she agreed.

Cecily pooled together all her courage as she forced her mouth to move.

“Ze... Ze... Ze-Zeke.”

“Very good.”

She didn’t manage to say his name very clearly, but it seemed that Zeke was appeased nonetheless.

“Ze... Zeke? It’s fine now. You don’t need to worry anymore.”

“So pretty.”

“Like I said...!”

“Pretty. Beautiful. Wonderful. My one and only Cecily.”

“O-Oh my goodness...”

“I’m sorry, I can’t say it enough. I want to keep telling you that you’re so pretty.”

Cecily could only mumble in response.

“Cecily,” Zeke said. “Would you care to date me?”

As Zeke said these magic words with such care, Cecily felt the last remaining energy drain out of her body.

“D-D-D...”

Dating a man? Me?

And not only that—the person that she liked?

Cecily's emotions didn't feel real. Her brain was going strange from lack of oxygen; her facial muscles weren't working.

It was then that she reached her limit. Her reply fell from her lips.

"I-I-I will d-date you."

"You will, Cecily?"

Oh... His dimple.

A dimple had formed on the cheek of Zeke's smiling face.

As she reached out to touch it, he nuzzled his cheek into her hand. Everything he did seemed so sweet she could barely contain it. At that moment, Cecily was so happy she probably looked like she was about to cry. Zeke laughed.

"Cecily, are you okay? Your eyes are watering and you're sniffling. Your lovely lips are quivering."

"I, um, I'm fi—"

Cecily tried to answer Zeke who was peering closely into her face. He grinned fiercely at her. He leaned in close enough to touch Cecily's ear with his lips, and spoke in a quiet voice that only she could hear.

"Will you be able to keep up, Cecily? Our deep love for one another is about to accelerate."

His announcement made her tremble.

"I-It's going to get even better than this?"

"Of course. This is nothing compared to what's to come."

Cecily's whole body was filled with the anticipation of a sweet future. Being called pretty had been enough to set her heart racing enough to burst through her chest, but Zeke said there was more to come.

Yes, Cecily was utterly and truly happy.

Happy that the person she liked only had eyes for her. Happy that Zeke was obsessed with her. Incredibly happy that his strong arms and his sweet

whisperings were directed at her, and her alone.

What do I do? I'm so happy that I feel like I could die...

Who would have thought that the effects of the love potion would have been this great? No wonder the witches in the stories were so intent on making them. If you had a taste of happiness like this, you would never be able to go back.

And Cecily was the same. She was being tossed between her conflicting desire and sense of reason.

"Cecily? You okay? Hey, Cecily!"

With a sigh, Cecily's eyes rolled back into her head, and she fainted.

Chapter 3: Learning What Matters

Cecily awoke with a start.

As her eyes focused on the unfamiliar white ceiling overhead, she blinked a few times. She was lying in a luxurious canopy bed. It seemed like she had been asleep on this mattress—softer than anything she'd slept on before.

Sitting herself up, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in a mirror and noticed that she was wearing fancy nightclothes she'd never seen before. And judging by the light filtering through the window, it had probably been some time since her dinner with Zeke.

"Where am I?" she murmured.

"Oh, you're awake."

Cecily let out a shrill cry.

A woman she'd never met had entered the room and passed her a drink of water.

"Please drink your fill. It's not poisoned—it's just ordinary water."

"R-Right. Thank you very much."

Though Cecily had no idea what was happening, she brought the water to her lips. She was thirstier than she had realized and started drinking heartily.

The woman standing nearby was wearing a uniform, so was she a lady-in-waiting for a noble? As Cecily finished off the water, the woman stared.

Cecily then looked down at her clothes. Without her overcoat to hide her face, Cecily was unable to talk to anyone. Or rather, even without her overcoat she found it difficult to talk to someone she didn't know.

"If you're worried about your clothes, they are just being cleaned. I shall return them to you when they are ready."

"O-Okay," Cecily said, her voice catching in her throat. This woman had read her thoughts with a single stare. "U-Um... Where am I?"

The woman opened her mouth to answer Cecily's question when she was interrupted.

"Hey!"

From behind her, a little head came bobbing. Cecily couldn't look away. After all...

"You're awake! Are you feeling quite all right?"

...She's so cute!

It was a girl who looked to be around thirteen years old, or perhaps younger. She had wavy rose-gold hair. Her eyes shone an emerald green. Red lips stood out on her porcelain skin.

The beautiful girl who stood in front of Cecily seemed almost as if she'd stepped out of a picture book.



She's like a doll...

The girl stared back at the enraptured Cecily.

"I see. So you're the witch."

That one line caused Cecily to look away. After all, she couldn't help but remember that old woman who had looked at her as if she were something filthy. She didn't think she'd be able to emotionally recover if this girl looked at her in the same way.

"You really do have beautiful eyes!" the girl said.

"Excuse me?"

This girl hadn't called her disgusting or strange.

"Aren't you scared of me? I'm a witch."

"Why would I be scared?"

Furrowing her brow in confusion, the girl continued as if she was saying the most obvious thing in the world: "I think witches are cool."

Cool? Cecily was completely taken aback by this unexpected compliment. She wanted to say more, but unfortunately, the young girl changed the topic.

"I must say, I was really surprised when the captain's loins took you here."

Wait—"loins"?

Cecily thought she'd heard a word that seemed out of place, but the girl went on.

"He brought you here all in a fluster, saying that he couldn't bring an unmarried woman into the squalid knights' dormitory. I've never seen the captain's loins make that kind of face before."

Loins don't have faces...

"Lady Charlotte. Why not begin with self-introductions?"

"Oh, right, I forgot. My name is Charlotte."

"I-I'm Cecily. Thank you kindly for letting me sleep here."

Wilting under Charlotte's elegance, Cecily bowed her head.

The maid went on. "You are in the presence of the Fifth Princess, Her Royal Highness Charlotte."

The maid's words caused Cecily to freeze in her tracks.

The Fifth Princess?! That means...she's a princess.

Cecily had imagined that the girl was of noble birth, but to think she had royal blood! Not only that, she was the daughter of the king!

"Lady Charlotte allowed you to stay here and recover on direct behest of your lover, the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade."

"I see... Thank you yet again."

It was as Cecily bowed once more that she noticed something odd.

Wait. "Lover"?

While Cecily was pondering this, Charlotte, on the other hand, had puffed out her cheeks in indignation. It seems she was embarrassed to be thanked.

"The Celestial captain is my wings. Of course I'd help."

What a strange turn of phrase.

But as Charlotte said this, Cecily remembered something. The Celestial Knight Brigade was in charge of protecting the kingdom's skies, but they were also tasked with protecting the young princess. Yes, the fifth princess, who was lauded as the kingdom's greatest treasure.

"Cecily!"

A voice cut through her thoughts at that moment. At the same time, the door was flung open.

Short black hair. Hazel eyes reminiscent of sharp daggers. It was Zeke.

"Zeke!"

When Zeke heard Cecily call his name, his face crinkled into a smile. However, he didn't stop walking towards her.

"How uncouth of you, Sir Zeke."

Chided by the maid, Zeke put on a stony expression and fell to one knee.

“My deepest apologies. I didn’t realize Princess Charlotte was here too.”

“I don’t care,” Charlotte said in a quiet voice as she hid her small body behind her maid. Only her fists were visible as she avoided looking at Zeke.

How odd.

What was between them didn’t feel like the relationship between the protector and the protected.

However, Zeke seemed used to Charlotte’s obviously scared demeanor. He continued talking, as if he were instead speaking to the maid.

“I must thank Your Royal Highness for your kindness with this matter. I am truly grateful for your swift assistance despite the late hour,” Zeke spoke with his head still bowed respectfully. *He must be talking about how they helped me.*

The princess, still clutching her maid, muttered something. The maid nodded and spoke.

“Pay it no mind, Sir Zeke. Lady Charlotte intends to accept Lady Cecily as a friend. His Majesty has given permission for Lady Cecily to stay in the Snowflower Palace.”

“Huh?”

Though she had remained silent up till now, Cecily couldn’t help but blurt this out. The Snowflower Palace was where Charlotte lived. However, Cecily had never heard of guests being allowed to stay there.

Perhaps sensing Cecily’s surprise, Charlotte peeped her head out and asked, eyes quivering.

“Do you not want to?”

Cecily’s voice caught in her throat.

It was impossible for her to reject Charlotte—this lovely princess in front of her whom Cecily had longed to meet. Furthermore, she wanted to speak more with Charlotte herself.

“O-Of course I do.”

“Really? I’m so glad!”

Charlotte beamed as she said this, but perhaps sensing Zeke’s gaze, she toned down her grin into a sweet smile.

Seeing her so happy, Zeke smiled in turn.

“If I may ask, Princess Charlotte, how have you been these past few days?”

Charlotte almost leapt up in surprise at Zeke’s words. She answered him in a brusque tone.

“I-I’ve been quite fine, thank you.”

“Quite fine, huh? Glad to hear it.”

Cecily looked on at their somewhat stilted exchange.

This must be what Zeke was talking about...

“The people I’m tasked with protecting get scared of me. Sometimes when I’m out on patrol, I’ve made women and children cry too.”

Zeke spoke of this as if it were simply a fact of life, but he’d had a lonely look in his eyes. That was no surprise, really—Zeke was a kind man. Anyone would be hurt to have their kindness reciprocated with cold cruelty.

Maybe that’s why Zeke chose to help me that day.

When Cecily had been accused as the culprit on the sole grounds that she was a witch, perhaps Zeke had empathized with being misunderstood, and couldn’t simply let her suffer. He knew firsthand the pain of that.

I hope Lady Charlotte realizes this.

Vexed by this thought, she gestured Zeke over. Initially unsure what she was doing, Zeke eventually cottoned on and jogged to her side.

“Zeke, why—”

As she said this, Zeke held her arm and drew her close. He whispered gently into her ear.

“If you like, would you come and visit me?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll be waiting. For however long I have to.”

The warmth of his smile was proof enough: the effect of the love potion hadn’t worn off. He smiled again at Cecily, who was now red as a tomato, before walking away.

The sweet tone of his voice kept echoing in Cecily’s ear.

✧ ✧ ✧

Afterwards, a number of maids attended to Cecily, preparing her a bath along with helping her change into a fresh set of clothes.

The huge bathtub and the magnificent palace were straight out of a fairy tale. Everything made Cecily’s heart race, but she refrained from showing this excitement and merely did as the maids asked of her.

However, she had to give a firm no when the maids brought out a dress for her—a splendid piece that looked like it was fit for a princess. She was Charlotte’s guest. Even if the princess had asked her to be her friend, at the end of the day, Cecily was still a commoner. She was more than overjoyed by the offer but found it hard to accept such generosity.

In all honesty, I would love to try it on, but I can’t. My stay here is only temporary.

It would be no good for Cecily to grow used to a life of luxury and be unable to return to her former life in her little hut. A year still remained of her life here, after all.

That reminds me, I wonder if Rolo’s doing okay.

He was a cat who did as he pleased. Once he had gone missing for a whole month, then returned home as if he’d never been gone at all. Cecily was sure he’d be all right.

“Now then, Lady Charlotte is waiting in the garden. Allow me to show you the way.” The maid paused. “Lady Cecily?”

The maid’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts. “Oh, yes!” Cecily replied, still slightly on edge at the whole situation.

Putting on her beloved overcoat over her freshly laundered pinafore, Cecily

followed the maid Maria—Charlotte's lady-in-waiting—out to the garden.

In the back of her mind, Cecily recalled the image of Charlotte from when they had parted a few hours before.

Her rose-gold hair that seemed to have crushed jewels mixed into it. Her enormous emerald eyes. Cecily could hardly believe that someone as elegant as the fifth princess could exist.

Charlotte was well known throughout the kingdom. The affection she received from her people far exceeded that which the king and her brothers received. The Snowflower Palace had even been built specially for her, and it was there she currently resided, and at which Cecily had been invited to stay.

That she had the personal protection of the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade was proof of the fact that her kingdom loved her. Indeed, over the generations, the Celestial Knight Brigade had acted as the protector of the king or the crown prince, but now Charlotte had their full protection.

As long as this ultimate protection was alive and well, there was no fear of Charlotte being assassinated by an evildoer. Well, in all honesty, Charlotte's charm is so incredible that even the assassin may have decided to protect her instead. That was just how lovely the young princess was.

However, a worry lurked in the back of Cecily's mind.

"May I ask a question?" Cecily said, trying her best to be polite. "Are Lady Charlotte and Zeke not so open with one another?"

"Oh, that. Well, Lady Charlotte finds all men—not just Sir Zeke—difficult to deal with."

"What does that mean?"

Cecily wondered if perhaps Charlotte had had an unpleasant encounter with a man in the past. Reading Cecily's concerned expression, Maria shook her head.

"There hasn't been a particular incident or anything like that."

"Then what could have caused this?"

"I believe it may be due to her older brothers' heavy criticism of men. Ever since she was young, they told her that all men in this world are trash and

worthless garbage, because their brains are directly connected to their loins. This has led her to have an extreme distrust of men, and as such, she rarely leaves the palace. She has distanced herself, saying she doesn't want to even come near the 'loins' that are His Majesty and her brothers."

That's pretty much every man in her life that she hates, then.

It was her brothers' excessive love for her that had ended up causing her distrust of men—including the brothers themselves.

The princess is just like me—she's not good with people. However, the one difference is that her fear of people is exclusive to men.

Cecily now understood why the princess had called Zeke "the captain's loins." To Charlotte, men were nothing more than the lower halves of their bodies.

In light of this, however, Charlotte's attitude towards Zeke seemed downright kind. She had tried in her own way to at least hold some semblance of a conversation with the man.

"Isn't the Celestial Knight Brigade all men?"

"Indeed, it is as you say," Maria said with a weary sigh. "However, His Majesty the King declared that this would be preferable to less dependable protection."

That makes sense.

Cecily could understand this reasoning. Recently, an order of female knights had been founded and was putting all their efforts into training, but they were not yet comparable to the Celestial Knight Brigade. The king was worried that they might not be capable of protecting the princess in the worst-case scenario.

"But isn't this hard on Lady Charlotte? Having only male knights to attend her during things like tea parties and the like..." As Cecily murmured these words, she felt Maria's gaze upon her. "D-Did I say something odd?"

"Not at all. I was merely impressed by how observant you are."

Cecily sighed in relief—she wasn't being told off.

"As you say, Lady Cecily—if she had female knights to guard her, then things would be made simpler whenever a male presence would not be preferred. I have requested for a few female knights to attend her, but...due to certain

reasons, it is difficult at present.”

Difficult?

As Cecily was about to ask why, there was a sudden scream. The cry was loud enough to shatter glass, leaving Cecily stunned. Maria took off running—the scream had been Charlotte’s. Cecily sprinted after her as they made their way to the princess.

As the rose-filled garden finally came into sight, Cecily saw Charlotte almost falling out of her chair, with a suspicious man standing over her.

“Lady Charlotte!”

“M-Maria! Help me! He came leaping out from the shrubbery—th-this disgusting pair of loins!”

“Please calm yourself, Lady Charlotte,” Maria said, as she held Charlotte close and stroked her hair.

Meanwhile, the man began to speak in an exasperated tone.

“I wish you wouldn’t say I ‘leapt out of the shrubbery.’ That makes me seem like some kind of suspicious individual.”

“I said that because you *are* a suspicious pair of loins!” Charlotte screeched.

Unable to get a read on the situation, Cecily looked at the man that Charlotte was shouting at. Standing there was a man with shoulder-length blond hair. As their eyes met, Cecily gasped in recognition.

It’s him!

He was a handsome man wearing the blue knight’s uniform. He had gentle eyes, a well-shaped nose, and lips that wore a tender smile. He seemed to give off a somewhat seductive air.

He was the knight whom Zeke was talking to in the cafeteria. His name was...Alphonse.

Noticing Cecily’s stare, the knight blinked a few times before talking.

“Wait a second. It’s you.”

As expected of a wyvern-riding knight, he wore few accessories, yet the

dissolute air he exuded nonetheless overwhelmed Cecily. Not only that, Cecily knew that Alphonse didn't have a positive opinion of witches. There was no way of knowing what degrading words might come out of his mouth.

Indeed, Alphonse had been right—he had warned his friend Zeke of falling prey to a love potion, and Cecily had in fact made Zeke drink one. The fact that Zeke had chugged it of his own accord was no excuse—Cecily knew that.

"I-It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Cecily Ramps."

Wilting in fear, Cecily bowed to Alphonse to avert her gaze. Alphonse clapped his hands together in recognition.

"Ah! So you're Zeke's first-ever girlfriend."

"G-Girlfriend?"

Cecily went stiff with shock. Perhaps noticing Cecily's embarrassment, Alphonse bowed and introduced himself.

"Where are my manners? The name is Alphonse Near. I'm the vice-captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade. An absolute pleasure."

"Stupid playboy."

"...Princess Charlotte, if you're going to speak badly of me, I'd humbly request you do it so I can't hear you," said Alphonse. He then turned to Maria. "I must say, Madam Maria, you are as beautiful as ever today."

Maria turned to Cecily as if Alphonse and his pearly white smile weren't there at all.

"You understand now, I hope, Lady Cecily. It is because of this womanizer that we are unable to assign any female knights to the Snowflower Palace. This man has caused a number of maids to be unable to do their jobs properly and end up having to leave the palace altogether."

S-So that's it...

They were scared that Alphonse would seduce the female knights who were stationed here. A serious issue, indeed.

"But all the same, why—"

“Hm?”

As Cecily mumbled to herself, Alphonse gave her a quizzical look. Cecily looked back at him, furrowing her brow in confusion, as he played with his long hair.

Why hasn’t he mentioned the fact that I—a witch—am now Zeke’s girlfriend?

Cecily had heard their conversation in the cafeteria loud and clear—Alphonse was suspicious of Cecily simply on the grounds that she was a witch. It was obvious now, with her red eyes, that she was a witch, so why wasn’t he saying anything?

Cecily couldn’t let him know that she had been eavesdropping on them. As she racked her brain wondering what to say, Alphonse spoke up with a nonchalant air.

“Oh yeah—you’re a witch, aren’t you?”

Charlotte glared at him, but Alphonse continued, unfazed.

“Thing is, I don’t have such a good impression of witches...but Zeke gave me an earful, you know. He said that if I dared hurt you simply because you were a witch, then he wouldn’t hesitate to cut me—his friend—down in an instant.”

“He said that...?”

“Yeah. He’s such a stubborn person that I knew he was serious as soon as the words left his lips. I won’t interfere in your relationship, so don’t worry about that,” Alphonse said, waving his hand in the air as if the matter were settled.

Charlotte snorted in disdain.

“Only someone stupid would interfere in the business of two people who love each other. If you did anything, I wouldn’t stay quiet about it either, you know.”

“Two people who love each other, you say... You are adorable, Your Royal Highness. You’re at that sweet age where you know nothing of love and romance.”

Charlotte pouted at Alphonse’s words.

“You deserve the death sentence for daring to mock the princess, you foul

pair of loins!”

Alphonse merely laughed at her threat.

“Well, I’d better watch my step. Now then, I’ll come and hang out with you later, Your Royal Highness.”

“I hope you never come back!”

Alphonse laughed again at Charlotte, who was red with rage, before disappearing back into the shrubbery. Charlotte snarled at Alphonse as he left, sounding like a small dog barking at an intruder. Then, realizing Cecily was standing there, she turned back around suddenly.

“That’s right! The tea party! Please, sit down, Cecily.”

“O-Of course.”

Despite the minor incident with Alphonse, the table for the tea party was undisturbed and ready for them. Maria and the other maids poured the tea and placed a number of treats out for the pair.

“Cecily? Are you tired or something?”

“N-No, I’m quite fine.”

Despite this assurance, Cecily worried that her weariness showed in her expression.

Charlotte wasn’t to know, but Cecily was an introvert. She had woken up in a new and unknown location and, in the time since, had been forced to meet and talk to so many new people. It was no surprise that she was exhausted.

“Try one of these cookies. They didn’t skimp on the butter when making them, so they’re really scrumptious. Let’s focus on this and forget that stupid Alphonse’s loins.”

“Th-Thank you, I will.”

After taking the cookie that Charlotte had offered, Cecily took a bite. It was so delicious she was struck speechless.

Charlotte let out a small giggle. “I’m happy you like them.”

It seemed that her pleasure showed in her expression. She nodded back at

Charlotte.

“I actually have something I want to ask you, Cecily,” Charlotte said, as she placed her teacup back on its saucer and gave her a look that was almost a glare.

She’s beautiful even when she’s glaring at me...

If it were anyone else glaring at her, Cecily would have wondered what she’d done to deserve it. However, Charlotte’s stare had no force behind it, so Cecily was able to stay calm.

“Cecily. You are dating that person’s loins, aren’t you?”

“‘That person’s loins’? Which loins are you referring to?”

Charlotte let out an embarrassed cough.

“P-Please don’t make me say his name. The loins of the captain.”

Zeke and I are dating...

This fact was still like a dream to Cecily. But the truth of the matter was that last night, Zeke had confessed his love for Cecily, and she had accepted it. They were now dating, and Zeke had apparently told Charlotte and Alphonse this fact as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

But...that’s only because of the love potion.

As Cecily fell quiet, Charlotte continued to speak.

“Are you sure it’s safe to date a man? Men are merely lust personified—nothing more than the basest of all creatures. I’m just scared for you.”

Charlotte’s warped views were most likely because of the warnings her brothers had given her. Her choice of words was rather extreme, but it was clear that she cared for Cecily despite only having just met her. Although her views were a little off the mark, she was nevertheless a kind young woman.

Charlotte continued with an anxious look on her face. “Not only that, all men are wolves. If you don’t watch out, they’ll gobble you up!”

Cecily shook her head at this.

“Zeke is a kind man.”

She had only just met him, but this was something she could say with certainty and pride.

“But you can’t know that for sure!” Charlotte said, stamping her feet on the ground.

“Lady Charlotte, you don’t discriminate against witches, do you?”

“I don’t, but what’s that got to do with this?” As soon as she’d said this, however, Charlotte raised her hands to her mouth in surprise. “I see what you’re saying... So that’s why the captain’s loins brought you to me,” she murmured in understanding.

Cecily couldn’t help but feel some amount of happiness. Charlotte must have understood that Zeke was indeed a kind person. She was aware that she couldn’t be anything as grand as a bridge between the princess and her knight, but she thought that perhaps she could help Zeke at least a little bit.

At that moment, Charlotte leaned her elbows on the table and beamed at Cecily. Hers was a radiant smile, as if a gorgeous flower had suddenly come into bloom.

Cecily was taken aback by this, wondering what had prompted Charlotte to suddenly smile at her. The princess gave a small chuckle.

“You’re grinning, Cecily.”

“I am?”

“You should smile more often. You look absolutely lovely when you do.”

Unsure whether to believe her, Cecily touched her hand to the corner of her mouth and noticed that it was raised.

I’m smiling...?

Back when she had been living in her village with the other witches and people she knew well, she recalled that she’d smiled almost every day. She was also certain that, even after being ousted from the village and living alone with Rolo, she smiled from time to time.

However, these smiles vanished from her face as soon as she was around people she didn’t know. Whenever she went out, she pulled her hood low over

her face so that she could only see the other person's hands, trying to make herself smaller in her day-to-day life.

"You said that you thought witches were cool, didn't you, Lady Charlotte?" Cecily said after a pause.

"I did," said Charlotte, taking a bite of a cookie.

"What makes you think that way?"

"Well, it's something I've not given much thought to before, but it's probably because my father's loins have long since been trying to locate a witch—any witch, really."

By her father's loins, she must mean the king.

"Ever since he was small, my father's loins have been searching for a potion to regrow hair. Unfortunately, he's been getting worked up because every potion he's ever tried has failed. And so, he said that if he ever meets a real witch, he'll get her to make him one."

"Allow me to add this for the sake of His Majesty's honor," Maria, who was standing beside Charlotte, said. "His Majesty is looking for a hair growth potion for his *head*. I pray there will be no misunderstandings about this."

Cecily nodded, grasping the situation. She finally realized why it was that Charlotte had been kind to her, and what her real motive was. So, despite her worry that saying this might cause Charlotte to hate her, Cecily decided to confess that she was not the kind of witch that Charlotte thought she was.

"Lady Charlotte, I'm really sorry. I don't know how to make a hair growth potion."

"What?"

"I'm a witch, but not a very good one. So..."

"No, no—you've got it wrong, Cecily."

"Huh?"

As Cecily raised her bowed head, she noticed that Charlotte's cheeks were puffed up in annoyance, bringing to mind a squirrel. Charlotte let out a sigh and

twirled her long hair around a finger.

“You don’t need to worry about that, Cecily. I don’t care one jot about my father’s loins.” It seemed that Charlotte was telling the truth. At least, Cecily thought so. “This isn’t something I’m proud of, but I don’t have a single friend. Which is why I won’t tell my father’s loins about you, Cecily, even if he asked if I knew any witches.”

“Lady Charlotte...” Cecily said, her chest growing warm with happiness.

Even though Charlotte had every right to be angry at Cecily for her misunderstanding, Charlotte had chosen her words carefully so as not to hurt her. Cecily decided to be honest as well.

“The truth is, I don’t have a single friend either.”

“That means we’re like two peas in a pod,” Charlotte laughed with a toothy grin. “I feel like we’ll become good friends.”

For the first time, Cecily locked eyes with Charlotte. She hadn’t managed to do so a single time all day. When seen from the front, Charlotte’s rose-gold hair and emerald eyes seemed to positively dazzle with light. They were more beautiful than even the most precious jewel.

“The captain’s loins told me that you live alone in the forest. You can stay here as long as you like,” Charlotte said, before going on with some pride in her voice. “You can tell me anything that you feel you can’t share with the captain’s loins. I am very tight-lipped, I’ll have you know!”

“Of course,” Cecily said. She was so happy to be told this. However...she couldn’t tell Charlotte that Zeke had drunk a love potion.

No... This is something I can’t share with her.

All Cecily could do was nod as she tightened her hands into two anxious fists.

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The next day...

Leaving the Snowflower Palace, Cecily headed to the wyverns' stables.

Both the Snowflower Palace—which was specifically built somewhere far away from the loins of Charlotte's father and brothers—and the wyverns' stables were located outside the castle. It was simple to get from the Snowflower Palace to the stables—all you had to do was leave the main gate and head left along the paved road.

The wyverns were large creatures, so tall that you had to look up to see them, and they had a wide pasture and lake to themselves. Their spacious living grounds were almost like a public park, but anyone other than the knights was generally forbidden from entering this space. Even if this weren't forbidden, however, there were few who would willingly approach this area and the potentially dangerous wyverns within.

I doubt I'd be allowed anywhere near their actual stables.

The wyverns were difficult creatures to raise. If someone like Cecily whom they didn't know in the slightest appeared, it was likely that they would be shocked, act unpredictably, and, in the worst-case scenario, run away. It was said that you could build a mansion or two in the royal capital with the amount of money required to raise a single wyvern, and so Cecily didn't want to be responsible for making one go missing—her savings wouldn't even begin to cover the necessary costs.

As Cecily continued to walk towards the stables, she began to see buildings in the distance. The pasture surrounding them was empty—it seemed that the wyverns didn't tend to go outside at this hour. Bordering this pasture was a hedge. Functionally, it was useless against a creature that could take to the skies when it wished, but it served to prevent any passersby from getting too close.

Near the hedge, Cecily spotted two young knights talking. Their blue uniforms were the same as what Zeke and Alphonse wore.

"Excuse me—my name is Cecily Ramps. I'm here to see Zeke."

The pair took a quick glance at one another before breaking into wide smiles.

Cecily was instantly taken aback—it was clear by their faces that they were more than happy to show Cecily the way. They were warm and welcoming as they spoke to her.

“We’ve heard all about you! Of course we know of you, Lady Cecily. You’re the captain’s lover, after all.”

“Speak of the devil—the captain’s over there! Hey, Captain! Lady Cecily’s here to see you,” one of the knights called, looking over at a figure that was little more than a dot on the horizon.

“Cecily!”

In the next moment, a cry rose up from that tiny dot as it grew larger and larger at an alarming rate.

As Zeke raced towards her at an animallike pace, his eyes glittered as they caught hers.

Wow, the effects of the love potion are still going...

That was as much levelheaded thinking Cecily could manage, for Zeke had just arrived.

“You came! I’m so happy.”

“Whoa!”

He gave her a great hug, embracing her as if he were well and truly in love with her, and Cecily felt his strong hand on the back of her head. Her breath caught in her throat—both due to her joy and the tight hug. She patted Zeke’s back and he hurriedly let her go.

“Sorry for suddenly embracing you. I didn’t scare you, did I?”

“I w-was a l-little...”

Cecily had meant to say, “I was a little surprised, yes,” with a nonchalant air, but her mouth just wasn’t working. He had well and truly caught her by surprise.

Zeke leaned in close and looked at Cecily, his eyes narrowed and full of remorse.

“Please forgive me—I just can’t hold back my feelings for you. When I’m not with you, my head’s full of thoughts of you and my heart feels like it’s going to tear out of my chest. You may criticize me for my impatience.”

Maybe it was true she ought to criticize Zeke’s current behavior, but Cecily could not even begin to do so because it wasn’t actually his fault.

The other two knights watched this strange scene as they spoke to one another in hushed voices.

“I know the vice-captain did say as much, but it looks like he wasn’t lying. The captain really is head over heels for a younger woman.”

“Yeah, but I still can’t believe what I’m seeing. The captain’s usually such a demon, but now he’s got that sweet look in his eye.”

“Man, I wish I had a cute girlfriend like Lady Cecily...”

Their conversation was something that would usually cause Cecily’s cheeks to flush in embarrassment, but Zeke glared over at them in an instant.

“Touch her and you’re dead meat.”

Flinching in terror, the pair bowed remorsefully.

At that moment, a shrill sound rang out from the stables. Spinning around, Cecily saw that a cloud of dust was rising from that direction. And from within the dust, a huge bipedal figure rose.

“A white wyvern?!”

Wyverns were fierce-looking creatures with rugged skin and a set of vicious fangs. They looked similar to dragons—creatures that existed in an age long past—but actually belonged to another group called drakes. Although their wide, gentle eyes and calm expressions might fool you into thinking they were meek creatures, this would be a mistake. Their personalities matched their size and fearsome bodies, and they had even more vicious dispositions than the dragons that came before them. Absolute care was needed in raising them.

Usually, wyverns had gray bodies. The reason why the uniform of the Celestial Knight Brigade was blue was so that the knight and his steed would be camouflaged against the sky.

However, the wyvern that was rapidly approaching was a pure white.

It's so beautiful.

Cecily was enraptured by this white wyvern that glided over the green pasture. It was as if she was staring at a creature straight out of a fairy tale...

"Cecily, forgive me!"

"Whoa!"

As she stood there in a daze, Zeke leapt at her and pushed her out of the way. She fell with a scream, but one of the knights nearby caught her.

"Take Cecily and get somewhere safe!" Zeke ordered as he ran towards the wyvern.

It was clear that the wyvern was in some distress. At the rate it was going, it would soon crash through the hedge and head towards the Snowflower Palace, where Charlotte was.

Cecily realized just then that Zeke was heading off to stop it all on his own.

Zeke's in danger!

The wyvern paid no heed to Zeke, who had reached its heels. Cecily was terrified it would stomp him to death, or perhaps decide to tear him to pieces with its fangs. As this frightful sight passed through her imagination, she made up her mind.

"I'm sorry!"

"Ah! W-Wait, Lady Cecily!"

Cecily seized her chance to slip from the knight's grasp and began to chase after Zeke.

Zeke himself was unaware of this—he was approaching the wyvern with hands raised to show he meant no harm. Cecily dashed past him and, for the first time in her life, let out a shout.

"Stop!"

As soon as the wyvern heard this single word, its legs did in fact stop. It couldn't come to a halt immediately, but it pedaled its feet on the ground as it

slowed down, coming to a stop before laying down. This was a pose showing its obedience. Zeke and the two other knights were staring open-mouthed, but Cecily approached the wyvern with no fear in her heart and stroked its lowered chest.

“There we go. Well done, you.”

The wyvern let out a contented sound from the back of its throat.

“Cecily... What did you do?”

“Um, I’ve been good with animals ever since I was small,” Cecily said simply to the stunned Zeke. Her shout earlier had caused her throat to become sore, and she let out a cough.

“That may be so...but a wyvern’s not like a dog or a cat.”

Zeke was completely right, of course. Wyverns were rather unique creatures, in that they only opened their hearts to the person that had raised them. To anyone else, they would immediately bare their claws and fangs.

Despite that, this wyvern was calm and gurgled as it enjoyed being petted by Cecily.

“Ah!”

Cecily remembered something.

Although they were different from the ones in real life, the witches in the stories possessed a variety of special powers, such as being able to use ancient magic or having the ability to tame any living creature.

Maybe the wyvern reacted to my witch’s blood.

After all, it was thanks to the witches of long ago that these vicious magical beasts had been tamed by humans.

A knight with a remorseful expression—or perhaps it would have been more accurate to say he was deathly pale—approached the group and dropped down onto one knee before his captain. Zeke turned away from Cecily and faced the knight.

“Cyril, why did you let Snow out?” he roared.

“I-I’m sorry. It’s because my wyvern approached Snow. Snow then got rather worked up and broke out of the cage.”

This knight who was called Cyril had black hair and glasses, and seemed like a sensible young man. He was probably about the same age as Cecily. His youthful face was pale with fear and he looked like he might fall over at any point. Behind his glasses, his eyes started to well up with tears.

“Sorry, all—I was nearby but couldn’t stop Snow.”

With an embarrassed look on his face, Alphonse also appeared. Looking from Alphonse to Cyril, Zeke let out a big sigh.

Perhaps noticing Cecily’s anxiety, Snow opened an eye. It wouldn’t do to have Snow go on the rampage again, so Cecily gave it an encouraging smile and some more pets.

I wonder if Zeke’s going to dole out a harsh punishment.

Cyril hadn’t meant for any of this to happen. Fortunately, Zeke understood this without Cecily needing to intervene. As everyone stood in silence, Zeke scratched his head.

“We’re going to have to repair the bars again. Snow can break down any cage, and doesn’t even listen to me all the time.”

Cecily listened in silence, surprised at the levity of his remarks. However, Alphonse let out an amused laugh.

“Zeke, you really are softhearted. Come on, this kind of behavior would usually result in some punishment, no?”

“You’ll have to write a report detailing how you’ll make sure this won’t happen again. And I’m depleting a third of your food rations for the month. Got it, Cyril?”

“Y-Yes, sir! It won’t happen again!”

Taking Zeke’s hand, Cyril pulled himself up from the ground.

Cecily finally let out the breath that she’d been holding. As she stopped stroking the wyvern, it let out a small growl like a purr.

“I’m sorry. I’ll pet you lots more now.”

This wyvern seemed to be Zeke’s partner. Not only that, Cecily now knew its name.

“They call you Snow because you’re this pure-white color, huh? What a lovely name.”

As Cecily said this, Snow began to rise, as if prompted by some kind of signal.

“What is it, Snow?”

Cecily and Snow locked eyes for a moment.

In the next second, Snow opened its large maw and closed it over Cecily.

Did I just die...?

The knights standing nearby were in a state of shock.

Snow had Cecily in its jaws. At first, Cecily’s legs sticking out from her skirt were the only part of her that was visible, but as Snow tilted its head up, those legs too vanished from sight.

Evidently pleased with itself, Snow let out another gurgle. From between its teeth, Cecily’s pinafore poked out.

“Cecy’s been gobbled up,” Alphonse murmured in shock.

No one had ever died in such a horrible manner before.

“Rest her sou— Ow!”

“Cecily’s not dead,” Zeke said after smacking Alphonse on the head. “Wyverns move their throats when eating something, don’t they? But Snow’s throat isn’t moving. Cecily’s simply stuck there in her jaws.” He paused for a second. “This is how wyverns carry their young.”

“It is? So, has Snow recognized Cecy as her baby?”

This was as far as their conversation went—Snow had begun to flap its huge wings.

As the area was engulfed in a vicious gust, a dust cloud started forming—it

was impossible for anyone to keep their eyes open.

“Stop! Snow!”

Snow was preparing to take off. Zeke’s cry was utterly useless. Tutting in annoyance, Zeke leapt onto Snow’s back.

Snow didn’t have a saddle nor reins on. Sitting upon Snow bareback, Zeke shouted to Alphonse below, “Al! A rope!”

“I don’t have such a barbaric object on me! You’re a third-rate fellow if you rely on others for stuff like that!”

Despite this incomprehensible remark, Alphonse pulled a rope from his vest and tossed it to Zeke. Zeke grabbed the rope and skillfully secured one of his legs to Snow with it. Cyril let out a frightened cry as the wind buffeted him, causing his glasses to shatter.

“Captain, it’s dangerous! Look, my glasses broke!” Cyril yelled at Zeke, despite the wound on his cheek from the broken shards.

However, Zeke paid him no heed. After all, the most beloved person in his life was currently in a wyvern’s mouth.

“If I give up now, then I’m not a man!”

Snow let out another gurgle before stamping the ground with one of its feet —in the next moment, they were up high in the sky. Zeke clenched his teeth as he braced himself against the intense air pressure.

As for Cecily, trapped inside Snow’s mouth, she was buffeted by the wind that filtered inside. Her own mouth was horrendously dry from the air whipping around Snow’s mouth.

Snow had been flying directly upwards for a while, but perhaps having settled down after passing through the clouds, it relaxed and let itself be carried by the wind as it began to glide through the sky.

Every time it flapped its wings, Cecily shook in fright at the sound. It was incredibly terrifying not knowing what was going on outside. As she trembled in fear, she heard Zeke’s panicked voice calling from outside.

“Are you okay, Cecily?!”

Plucking up her strength, she managed to call back, “Y-Yes.” However, any common sense had been flushed from her brain.

Huh? Did Zeke die alongside me?

“Zeke... Have I d—”

Realizing that Cecily was fretfully panicking, Zeke called from above in a calm and measured tone.

“How do I put this... I’m just taking you on...a little date in the sky.”

“A date?!”

Cecily came to her senses immediately.

A date...in the sky!

Calming down, she realized she could see the blue of the sky and white clouds through the gaps in Snow’s teeth.

This was the first time in her life that she had been in the clouds. Her heart filled with joy at the situation. She was on a date—something that she had only ever dreamed of. She was spending time alone with her love.



“The world is a big place, I know, but I think we might be the first people in history to go on a date on the back of a wyvern.”

Zeke’s continued comforting words made Cecily completely forget her fear.

“Z-Zeke?”

“Yeah?”

“This is...the first date I’ve ever been on.”

She felt she heard Zeke laugh lightly.

“Me too.”

Regaining her composure, Cecily relaxed, resting upon Snow’s long tongue. It was warm, sticky, a bit smelly, and sometimes she felt drops of saliva slide down through her hair onto her forehead, but the joy in her heart let her ignore such trifling things.

“I’m a little jealous,” Zeke went on.

“Why’s that?”

“Snow’s tongue has touched you before mine has.”

Zeke! How can you say that?!

She was aware he was under the effects of the love potion, but still, this was a hugely shameless thing to say!

As Cecily wriggled awkwardly, Snow simply let out a slightly pained growl.

Zeke was using the rope Alphonse had given him to control Snow. He had been slightly worried, but it seemed like both Snow and Cecily had calmed down now, and he was thinking that they should land soon.

Unaware of what was going through Zeke’s head, Cecily called out, “Hey, Zeke? Is Snow a boy?”

I’m so calm, despite how scared I was...

If she had been a normal, run-of-the-mill girl, she would have fainted the instant Snow had gulped her up. But Cecily had quickly gotten used to her

situation and felt comforted by this thought.

Zeke smirked.

“What an interesting woman you are.”

“I knew it—Snow’s a girl.”

And so, the date of the young couple and a wyvern continued for a little longer.

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A few hours later...

Back at the Celestial Knight Brigade’s dormitory, Zeke was organizing some documents in the office, being helped in this laborious task by Alphonse. He frowned as he looked at the quote from the landscapers.

“It’s gonna cost a lot to redo that hedge, huh?” said Alphonse.

“It might be easier to not rely on them and just do it ourselves,” Zeke replied.

It was true that the Celestial Knight Brigade was funded directly from the royal vault; however, raising the wyverns was expensive, so they wanted to keep unnecessary costs down where possible.

“Ugh... Sounds like a lot of work.”

“Well, it’s not as if you’re going to help, are you?”

“Hah, you said it.”

Alphonse was well-known for skipping training. Zeke was under no illusions that Alphonse would be any help in redoing the ruined hedge.

Despite his lax attitude towards his role as vice-captain, Alphonse was popular with the knights. If there were more older knights, then they would no doubt be jealous of Alphonse’s looks, but the Celestial Knight Brigade was made up of young knights who seemed to look up to him.

“Zeke, about Cecy,” Alphonse said, sitting backwards on his chair and leaning over its back. He thought of Cecily—her soft, flaxen hair; her shy, red eyes that had a dangerous beauty to them. Alphonse had smelled the fragrance of many beautiful flowers until now, but he still couldn’t help but say, “She’s a cutie,

huh?”

As soon as he’d said this, Alphonse heard a peculiar sound rush past his ear. Then, a few strands of his well-groomed hair fluttered down to the floor.

Wondering what had happened, he turned around to face the wall behind him and saw that a dagger was embedded deep within it.

Zeke, the one who had thrown the blade with such precision, was looking down as he muttered in a low voice.

“I *will* kill you.”

“You threw that pretty close, man!”

“I wouldn’t have minded if it did hit you.”

Talk about scary!

The most frightening thing was that Alphonse knew that Zeke wasn’t joking.

“I wonder if Cecy’s fever has gone down. I’m pretty worried.”

Even though it was early summer, their high-altitude date had chilled Cecily to the bone.

Upon landing on solid ground, Zeke had gone to check on Cecily, but found her unconscious with her forehead burning. Alphonse doubted he would forget how panicked Zeke had been in that moment.

Zeke Stein was a man who was known for his calm and levelheaded attitude towards each and any situation. This was the first time Alphonse had seen his friend look so fretful before.

“Yeah,” Zeke said, sounding composed.

Alphonse glanced over at Zeke—he was more collected than he’d thought.

In the next moment, the pen that was clutched in Zeke’s hand shattered with a merciless crack.

“Oops. Seems I picked up a pretty fragile pen.”

Okay, he’s not calm at all.

Zeke must have been unable to think of anything but Cecily.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. Zeke asked who it was, and a reply came from beyond it.

“It’s Cyril. I’ve written my report on the mistake I made and how to avoid doing it again. I’ve brought it here for you.”

After receiving permission, Cyril nervously and awkwardly sidled in. His cheek was covered in gauze, but it looked like the wound wasn’t too deep.

“Show me.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Cyril was probably the timidest member of the entire brigade, and handed Zeke his report with shaking hands.

After a short while, Zeke gave a sniff. Alphonse turned around, wondering what it could be, and saw Zeke leaning his head back with his hand over his eyes.

“A wonderful report as usual,” Zeke said with a slight tremor in his voice. “I was really moved.”

“Thank you, Captain!”

“Is a report meant to be moving?!” Alphonse asked in an exasperated tone. Not only that, from the looks of it, apparently this scene was a common occurrence. Alphonse was a bit concerned as to how Cyril had managed to write so many reports, but he couldn’t talk because he had submitted far more in his time.

“I’m actually a writer alongside my duties as a knight,” Cyril said. “The captain often reads my work.”

“What? You’re a writer? Then why’d you join the brigade?”

“Because I thought I could use my experiences here in my novels. Plus, the pay’s pretty good.”

But to enter such a difficult line of work for a reason such as that? Cyril’s guts were almost commendable.

“Good work on finishing this,” Zeke said. “How’s the glasses situation?”

“I’m fine. I have about ten spare pairs, so I’m okay.”

That’s way too many!

Cyril was wearing a pair right now—they must have been a spare pair.

“And your injury?”

“It’s fine as well.”

“You should’ve asked about that first,” Alphonse said. Cyril might have had a big smile on his face, but Alphonse was somewhat exasperated by this whole affair.

Zeke nodded to himself as he stood up.

“Now then, I’ve got an urgent matter to attend to, so I’ll be off.”

An urgent matter?

Where had that old Zeke gone—the one to whom people had said that they couldn’t tell what he was thinking under that stony expression of his?

There was only one destination to which a man who was worried about his lover would go.

It’s obvious where you’re going—why not just be honest about it?

Alphonse watched as Zeke sped out of the office, feeling something almost paternal towards him.

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When Cecily opened her eyes, a now-familiar white ceiling came into view. She blinked a few times. She tried to get up but felt a rush of dull pain in her shoulders.

“Huh?”

The lace curtains of the bed opened at that moment, and Maria’s face appeared. Perhaps she had heard Cecily rouse.

“Lady Cecily. You have a fever, so I would advise you not to get up.”

“Do I?”

That said, her body did feel kind of hot.

Maria reached out to Cecily's face and removed a damp towel that was on her forehead, replacing it with a new one.

"It may be early summer, but high altitudes can be very cold. I understand you were on a date in a wyvern's mouth, but it is no surprise for you to have caught a fever from that."

"That's right... Snow ate me...I think?"

Maybe because of her fever, Cecily couldn't recall what had happened.

As Cecily racked her head, Maria gave her hair and neck a few sniffs.

"Thank goodness, it appears that the smell has gone now."

However, to the groaning young woman, this didn't sound like such a fortunate thing.

When Zeke and Cecily had returned from the sky a few hours ago, Cecily had been unconscious. Zeke had personally carried her, covered in wyvern saliva, back to the Snowflower Palace. He had wanted to get Cecily, who stank of wyvern, into the bath, but realized that in her unconscious state this wasn't the best idea. Maria and the other maids quickly cleaned her up as best as they could while keeping her body warm.

"Now then, enough groaning. You need to rest some more—you are tremendously exhausted."

"Can I have some water?"

"Of course."

Maria acted straightaway. She must have been worried about Cecily. Having raised Cecily into a seated position, she held a cup of boiled water to Cecily's lips and gradually tipped it.

"Both Lady Charlotte and I are very worried, so please take it easy."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll come check up on you later."

Maria drew the covers up to Cecily's shoulders before quietly leaving the room. Cecily closed her eyes. She let out another groan. Her head was heavy

and she couldn't think straight. Before long, she drifted into a dream.

Maybe because she was lonely, but she dreamt of her parents' home for the first time in a while. Her mother and father were chatting animatedly. Even in her dreams, her parents—who were famous for how they still acted as if they were in their honeymoon phase—were being so lovey-dovey with one another, so much that Cecily couldn't look at them for too long.

They were both beaming. As Cecily watched them, she felt an indescribable emotion somewhere between embarrassment and jealousy.

Cecily asked in a quivering voice.

Mom, did I make a mistake?

Her voice was the one she'd had when she was still a little girl, before she knew the truth.

Were you right? Is the love obtained through a love potion...true love?

Greta didn't respond. She simply held her husband and looked at Cecily with a loving smile.

I wonder how the witches in those stories felt...

When these witches used their love potions to alter the heart of the prince, to take the love the prince gave to the princess for themselves—what did they feel?

Were they happy? Were they satisfied? Or maybe they spent sleepless nights crushed by their guilt?

What about me? I have the heart of the one I love, but...

Cecily's chest twisted in pain. She let out another groan.

Feeling as if she were buoyed on a hot sea, she opened her eyes.

In the moonlit room, she saw someone's shadow. She couldn't help but see the person's bony hands reach out. They squeezed a cloth that had been soaking in water. They removed the lukewarm, damp cloth from her forehead.

"Zeke?"

She knew those hands didn't belong to Maria.

As she called out, the hands stopped. Hearing Cecily's weak voice, Zeke looked down with a happy but troubled expression.

Am I dreaming?

If she were, she didn't want to wake up.

Cecily pulled her hand from under the covers and reached out for Zeke.

"Don't...go."

She wasn't sure if she got the words out properly, but Zeke wordlessly took Cecily's hand.

As he clasped her hand, Cecily's heart relaxed. Touching each other like this, she was sure they would stay together forever.

His hands were far bigger than Cecily's. His fingers were long and his skin was tough. They were the hands of a hardened warrior.

If this is a dream...then maybe I can ask him.

Yes, she had been worried to ask this in real life, but she could manage it in a dream.

"Zeke... Why are you so kind?"

He answered her.

"I'm not kind to just anybody. I'm kind to you, Cecily, because I want to be."

This was the answer she had wanted to hear.

"I love you, so I want to be kind to you. I want to pamper you silly."

Under Zeke's rumbling voice was an undeniable allure.

Cecily chuckled derisively. Zeke was a poor fool to say these things without knowing the truth.

"But you don't know just how bad of a woman I am."

"A bad woman? You?"

"Yes. I'm wicked."

Zeke drew Cecily's hand to his face and kissed it.

“Cecily...”

Cecily felt Zeke quiver. She let out another snicker.

“If you knew everything, you’d hate me.”

Cecily hadn’t forced him to drink the love potion. However, that didn’t change the fact that she was the one who had made the love potion and brought it with her to see him. She knew that such a pathetic excuse was meaningless.

“I’d never get mad at anything you do.”

Cecily looked up at Zeke with eyes blurred by fever.

“Plus, if you’re this sweet, I’d welcome any pranks with open arms.”

As if to humor her, Zeke kissed her forehead.

His sweet kisses were so lovely. Cecily had intended to laugh, but she caused Zeke to look at her with worry in his eyes.

“Cecily, are you crying?”

His lips then moved to Cecily’s wet eyes.

She smelled a light cologne. It was the fragrance of the forest—a fresh scent that always followed Zeke around.

She was acquainted with his scent before she had even realized it. Her heart quivered at this fact.

“No... An eyelash just got in my eye.”

“Shall I use my lips to remove it?”

“Zeke...!”

Do love potions make their victims say such uncouth things?

Zeke stroked Cecily’s bright red face. His touch was so gentle she did want to cry.

I love you.

Cecily spoke in her heart.

You’re so lovely. I love you, Zeke.

She continued to speak these words she wanted to shout out loud. However, she felt if she put a voice to these thoughts, there would be no turning back.

Zeke didn't think as she did. Zeke was merely under the illusion that he loved Cecily due to the love potion. Cecily couldn't confess her love to someone who was in such a state.

I wonder what my younger self would think if she saw me now?

Would she hate this current Cecily for using the witchlike method of a love potion to force someone to fall in love with her?

No matter who rebuked her now, the fact of the matter was that she couldn't turn back.

I'm a wicked witch.

But she wanted to stay like this a little longer.

She wanted to stay by Zeke's side just a little longer...until the magic finally wore off.

Chapter 4: The Sound of Everything Falling Apart

Cecily’s everyday life now bloomed with color, like a well-cared-for flower.

She spent her days with Charlotte and was sometimes accompanied by guards on walks. Although they didn’t head over to the wyverns’ living grounds on these walks, thanks to Cecily’s presence, Charlotte now occasionally spoke to Zeke.

Rolo had somehow worked out where Cecily was, and before long, he was often spotted bathing in the sunlight with the wyverns. A smart cat, Rolo was doted on by those who worked within the castle.

My relationship with Zeke will end when the effects of the love potion wear off.

The love potion wearing off would herald the worst possible way of ending her relations not only with Zeke, but also with Charlotte, and with Alphonse and the other knights.

That wasn’t all—on top of that, Cecily couldn’t remain here. Eventually, she had to leave this land and return to her witch village.

She knew this deep in her heart...yet a part of her thought that this new life would last forever.

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One afternoon, on Cecily’s tenth day in the Snowflower Palace...

Cecily left the palace with a basket in hand as she headed over to the wyverns’ living grounds.

She wasn’t sure exactly when it was during this stay that she had rid herself of her habit of hiding her face with her hood. She hadn’t applied her eye drops, and she walked with confidence towards the pasture simply as she was. Nonetheless, this was thanks to the kindness of the members of the Celestial Knight Brigade, none of whom feared her red eyes.

“I hope this will make Zeke happy,” she murmured to herself. The basket hanging from her arm contained a selection of light foods made by Cecily herself. She had borrowed the Snowflower Palace’s kitchen and had set to work early this morning to prepare it all for him.

I don’t actually know what kind of food Zeke likes, so I ended up making a bit of everything.

Her preparations had been perfect, yet she was still full of that nervous energy that came from wondering how the man she loved would react.

The stables eventually came into view. Cecily glanced around, wondering where Zeke was. In the next moment, he leapt over the hedge to her side. Her heart raced at the sudden appearance of her lover.

“Cecily!”

“Zeke!”

Taking advantage of the fact that no one was around, Zeke gave Cecily a huge hug.

Easily embarrassed, Cecily flushed red. She couldn’t pluck up the courage to hug him back, nor could she push him away.

If only time would stop and this moment would last forever, she thought as she nuzzled her cheek against Zeke.

However, Zeke was a man who didn’t sit still—a man who was always on the move, ever accelerating. Even as he lovingly held one hand to Cecily’s face, he suddenly grabbed at the basket with the other.

“What a big basket. It’s way too heavy for your delicate arms—I’ll take it for you.”

Cecily’s heart went racing again as Zeke easily took the large basket in a single hand.

“Zeke, um, I was thinking we could maybe have lunch together today.”

“Then let’s.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, the wyverns are currently eating in their stables, so it’s safe to enter the pasture.”

She had fully intended to simply give the basket to Zeke before leaving if having lunch would be difficult, but it seemed that it would be no trouble.

Having noticed Cecily’s presence, Alphonse came strolling over.

“Oho! It’s Cecy!”

“Hello, Sir Alphonse.”

Before long, a group of knights had gathered round, most of whom she had already been introduced to.

The Celestial Knight Brigade was completely made up of young men, the oldest being twenty-five years old. As evidenced by the brigade’s captain and vice-captain—the twenty-year-old Zeke and nineteen-year-old Alphonse respectively—it was clear that traveling long distances by wyvern-back and fighting off magical beasts necessitated having a well-trained and youthful body.

Cecily said hello, beaming at them all.

“I brought lunch. I’m happy to share it with you all, so please help yourselves.”

“Are you sure?” Alphonse and the others asked, with big smiles on their faces.

The Celestial Knight Brigade’s dormitory only served breakfast and dinner, meaning that if the knights wanted lunch, they often ended up heading to the refectory in the castle, which was rather far away. Maybe due to this, Cecily’s offer of lunch made them rather glad.

However, Zeke wore a gloomy expression that was at odds with the rest of the group.

“Right... To be honest, I wanted to have lunch with just the two of us. But if it’s what you want, I’m happy to oblige, Cecily.”

“I’m sorry, Zeke. I was thinking of you as I cooked. I ended up making too much because I was thinking of how happy you’d be when you tried it all.”

Cecily's head drooped in shame. She had shared some of the feast with Charlotte and Maria, but even after they'd had more than their fill, there was still so much left over. Sharing it with Zeke's subordinates in the brigade was the only way to get through it all.

"Don't apologize. This is just my own stupid jealousy."

"It's fine. It makes me happy to see you get jealous over me."

"Oh, Cecily."

"Oh, Zeke..."

The pair stared at each other lovingly. Unable to bear the atmosphere any longer, Alphonse let out a cough.

"C-Come on, then. Why don't we give Cecy's feast a taste?"

Feeling as though they could finally move again, the knights set about spreading a blanket across the grass for everyone to sit upon. Before long, there was ample space to sit and eat, and the knights began to get settled.

Cecily was about to sit in an unoccupied spot when Zeke called out to her.

"Cecily, there's a seat right here."

"Huh? Where?"

Cecily looked at where Zeke was pointing and noticed that there was indeed a spot—in between his spread-out legs. As she looked from that space to his face, her cheeks started to burn with embarrassment.

"I-I think that wouldn't be..."

"Hey now, don't be shy. We're in love, aren't we?"

"B-But...everyone's looking at us."

"Who is? Not a single pair of eyes are on us."

Cecily looked around the group and saw that Alphonse, Cyril, and the other knights were for some reason all sitting in a line looking out over the wyverns' stables. They didn't seem to hear a word of Cecily and Zeke's conversation either.

Then... Then I guess it's okay?

No one was watching, after all. With this thought in mind, Cecily plucked up her courage.

"O-Okay then, if that's the case then I— Eep!"

Apparently Zeke couldn't wait a moment longer, for he had started pulling Cecily towards him by her hand. She fell to the ground and felt Zeke's toned body behind her. Two hands looped around her narrow waist, and as Cecily looked up at Zeke, he gave her a satisfied smile.

"Yeah. Like this is good."

Aren't we a little too close? Oh my...

Cecily had snuggled into her father when she was a little girl, but this was the first time she had been so close to a man since becoming an adult. Perhaps Zeke had also noticed that Cecily was stiff with nervousness, for he whispered gently in her ear as if to calm her down.

"You're so petite and cute. I need to be extra careful I don't squeeze you too hard and hurt you!"

"Zeke, please...!"

Zeke's whispers tickled her ear, and Cecily let out a laugh.

Forced to watch the sugary-sweet sight of these two innocent lovers flirting with one another for multiple minutes on end, the knights all wore awkward expressions. Cyril alone was avidly scribbling in his notebook, wondering how to integrate this into his latest novel.

"Man, the captain really is a greedy guy, huh?" someone whispered.

"Did you say something?"

"N-No, sir! Nothing at all!"

"Aw man," Alphonse said loudly. "I sure am hungry. I'd really like to try some of Cecy's cooking!"

"Yes, of course. Let's eat now then, shall we?"

With Zeke's arms still wrapped around her, Cecily slowly unpacked her basket.

As she did, the knights who had been frozen in silence let out a cheerful cry.

“Wow! It all looks incredible!”

This was the reaction she had been hoping for, and inwardly, Cecily’s chest puffed out with pride.

There were sandwiches with a whole range of fillings—ham, cucumber, egg, jam—various fried treats, and herb soup. The medicinal herbal tea in her flask had been flavored with honey so that it was neither too sweet nor bitter.

After Cecily had passed around the plates and forks wrapped in serviettes, the knights finally began to eat, having been looking forward to the meal.



“Wow, it’s delicious! You’re a real chef, Cecy.”

“It really is good. I’d eat this every day if I could.”

“Hee hee, thank you.”

Alphonse’s compliment made Cecily happy, but it was Zeke’s words that set her heart aflutter.

Zeke complimented me!

Cheeks flushed with joy, Cecily stabbed a fried treat with her fork and proceeded to lift it up to Zeke’s mouth.

“Zeke, open wide. Um, say ‘Ahh’!”

Every knight’s eyes fell upon the couple. They were all thinking the same thing: while they knew Zeke didn’t have to play along with this embarrassing act, they were a bit concerned with how their fearsome captain would react. Yes, he did dote upon Cecily. Yes, his arms were holding her from behind. But to be fed while saying “Ahh”? The knights conversed silently with their eyes and agreed that this task was a bit too difficult for their captain. And they knew what they needed to do—they had to prevent a negative outcome where Cecily ended up in tears!

But then, as they puzzled over how to go about this, bathed in nervous tension...

“Ahh!”

Every knight present was struck dumb with surprise. For there was Zeke with his mouth wide open, betraying their every expectation.

Cecily placed the food gently into his mouth.

“How is it? Yummy?”

“Yeah. A hundred times tastier this way too.”

Really? Their captain was smiling! And...really? His eyes were burning red with...well, surely it couldn’t have been anything but embarrassment?!

“Yay, I’m so glad.”

Zeke's honest reaction made Cecily smile with contentment.

It was a lovely smile that caused every knight's heart to skip a beat. Zeke then pulled Cecily in by her slender shoulders and buried his face in her hair.

"I almost want to gobble you up too, Cecily."

The knights were losing their minds. Yes, Zeke had whispered this, but every single one of them was close enough to hear what he'd said.

"Did you hear that?!"

"He said he wants to... No, I don't believe it!"

"Yeah, we must've misheard. There's no way our fearsome captain would say that! Wait... Thinking about how he's been recently, maybe he would*!"*

Cecily was also horribly embarrassed by Zeke's whisper, and her face was as red as if she'd just been boiled. Zeke planted a teasing kiss on her red-hot cheek.

"Hey now, don't pull that kind of face. It's so cute that I don't want the other guys to see it."

Cecily could only let out a small, panicked sound.

"I'm not angry, okay?"

She began to shake with embarrassment. Almost simultaneously, the knights let out a similarly panicked sound. They were also shaking—not with embarrassment, but with fear and confusion.

"I'm glad you two love one another. But don't forget that we're here too, all right?"

"*Vice-captain!"*

Everyone's hearts came together as one, grateful for their vice-captain's intervention.

"Thank you, vice-captain, for saying what none of us had the courage to say!"

With that, Zeke and Cecily seemed to come to their senses. With polite coughs, they returned to their lunch. Despite various small incidents of this sort, lunch otherwise proceeded peacefully.

“Zeke, would you like some medicinal herbal tea?”

“Yeah,” Zeke answered immediately.

He took a cup from Cecily. The tea was still pretty hot.

“I thought you might be a bit exhausted, so I gave it a relaxing effect.”

“You did? Thanks.”

Hoping he would enjoy it, Cecily watched him sip the tea. In the next moment, his eyelids started to droop wearily.

Huh?

“I’m a bit...slee...”

And then Zeke’s head slumped onto Cecily’s left shoulder.

He’s asleep.

The effect had been instantaneous. He must have been pretty tired to have fallen asleep this quickly.

“Sir Alphonse, could you help me move Zeke?”

“Gotcha. Sure.”

Cecily wouldn’t have been able to move Zeke by herself. But with Alphonse’s help, Cecily slipped out from between Zeke’s legs and moved to his side. They then moved his body and laid Zeke down, placing his head upon Cecily’s lap. As his head came to rest there, his breathing slowed to a point where it was evident he was fast asleep.

“Thank you, Sir Alphonse.”

“Not at all,” Alphonse replied, then paused for a moment. “I’m surprised. Even though Zeke is so against sleeping in front of others, he looks so relaxed right now.”

“I-Is that right?”

Cecily’s heart was sent aflutter again at this new information.

“We’ll be third-wheeling if we stay here for too long, won’t we? Zeke’s scheduled to guard Princess Charlotte this afternoon, so wake him up if he

doesn’t wake up on his own, okay?”

“O-Of course.”

“Enjoy yourselves.”

Alphonse gave a cheerful wave as he headed off. The other knights soon followed suit, and before long, Cecily and Zeke were left alone.

Cecily stared down at Zeke’s sleeping face as he let out gentle breaths. The frown that usually creased his brow was gone, and he looked like a little boy at rest. Cecily found this adorable.

She looked around to make sure no one was about, then pushed a few locks of hair behind her ear and whispered to the sleeping Zeke.

“I love you.”

A rush of relief filled her heart as she realized he was still fast asleep. As long as he couldn’t hear her, she could say she loved him as much as she liked.

✧ ✧ ✧

Charlotte took walks in the Snowflower Palace garden almost every day.

The knights from the Celestial Knight Brigade assigned to protect her differed from day to day, but usually there were five to ten of them on duty at a time. Today, Zeke and Cyril were assigned to be her afternoon guard.

The rest of the brigade was training with their wyverns. Usually Zeke led the training, but when Zeke was absent, Alphonse took over. Alphonse was unreliable when it came to showing up for work, but his skills were undeniable.

Zeke and Cyril were on standby, as close as Charlotte’s allergy to men’s loins would allow. She allowed them to come far closer to her than other knights. It was not really a suitable distance for guarding her, yet it wouldn’t do to frighten the one they had to protect. Thus, they had compromised.

Charlotte was relaxing in the sun as a maid stood nearby with a parasol. A white butterfly had settled on the tip of one of her pale fingers and was gently spreading its wings.

“This butterfly’s a female. It really is lovely.”

Charlotte was able to tell the sex of not only people, but of insects as well.

As Zeke watched over the smiling princess and kept his eye on the surroundings, he couldn't help but let his thoughts wander deep within his heart—not to the young girl with rose-gold hair, but to a woman with flaxen hair.

Maybe it's because of that nap I had after having Cecily's tea, but I feel really focused right now.

Zeke had never taken a single nap during the short lunchtime afforded to the knights, but after drinking Cecily's tea, he had slept deeply. When he'd woken up with his head on Cecily's lap, he found that he couldn't speak for a moment due to the shock and the wave of other emotions he felt. "Good morning," Cecily had whispered, with a coy expression on her face.

With the blue sky framing her, Zeke was taken by Cecily's beauty and wanted to follow his heart and hold her—but she had run off in embarrassment before he had the chance.

However, she's been more open to what I say and do recently, which is good.

Cecily was cute when she was embarrassed. But she was even cuter when she responded positively to his acts of affection. Almost unbearably so. Zeke started grinning to himself as he replayed the scene from earlier in his mind.

"Captain's loins. Your face is more agreeable than usual today," Charlotte suddenly said in a quiet voice.

Zeke and Cyril glanced at one another. It was rare for Charlotte to start a conversation with them. And it would have been rude not to respond. As he pondered her words, Zeke replied.

"I think it's because of the delicious medicinal herbal tea Cecily made for me."

"So you had the tea too? She gave me some earlier and I felt really relaxed after drinking it."

"The captain and the princess are having a normal conversation!"

Cyril started to tear up. Zeke sighed—this was a real overreaction.

"You may come a bit closer, Captain's loins. It is hard to talk at this distance."

“Of course,” Zeke said. A little nervous, he moved closer—gradually, so as not to frighten Charlotte.

The maids were equally surprised. No one could blame them—Charlotte’s dislike of men was quite severe. When it came to the muscular Zeke—or in more cruel terms, the vicious-looking Zeke—Charlotte couldn’t help but quiver every time she saw him. The first time he was assigned to her, she’d broken down in tears. Zeke had felt sorry for her, but he couldn’t abandon his duties either. On that day, he had truly felt at a loss.

What had occurred in Charlotte’s heart to allow her to talk to Zeke and even ask him to come closer?

I know what happened—this is all thanks to Cecily.

Zeke had asked Charlotte to take care of Cecily that day when she had fainted in the restaurant. He would have been plenty happy if she had allowed Cecily to simply stay the night, but Charlotte had taken a shine to her and had formally invited Cecily to be a guest in the Snowflower Palace.

Zeke had often seen the two of them happily chatting together. He couldn’t help but feel pangs of jealousy whenever he did, but as it seemed that they really were growing close, he did nothing more than silently watch over them.

And now, Charlotte was talking to Zeke. And the topic of conversation was as he had expected.

“It’s about Cecily,” Charlotte said.

“Yes? What did you wish to say about her?”

“What is it about her that you like?”

Charlotte didn’t even attempt to hide her extreme curiosity. Zeke answered briskly.

“If I had to choose, I’d say I like how pretty she is, as well as her earnest, hardworking attitude.”

“...My, what a quick response.”

Charlotte’s cheeks reddened. The maids twittered amongst themselves.

“At first, I thought she was shy, but I’ve learned just how expressive she can be. The way her expression changes with her mood is lovely to me, and just watching her makes me happy. That’s not all—she reacts so strongly to whatever I do, and her reactions are really precious. I’m simply saying what I feel, but I can’t help but want to tease her by being honest with these emotions, embarrassing though they may be. When she gets annoyed with me and looks like she wants to cry—even then, she’s truly gorgeous.”

“Oh my, oh my!”

As Charlotte clapped her hands together, the other maids joined her in applause. It seemed that what Zeke had said had been taken positively by all the women present.

A man who spoke of his lover in this way, without even realizing how impassioned he was becoming, was a rare breed. In mere moments, the maids’ opinion of Zeke had softened. Their eyes all said that they felt they had vastly misunderstood him.

“Okay. When did you first start liking Cecily?” Charlotte asked, tilting her head.

The first spark of love—was there any girl who wasn’t interested in this? Most likely not. The maids all looked at Zeke with anticipation in their hearts.

However, Zeke didn’t reply. Charlotte pouted, upset.

“Hey! Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“Ah, sorry. I just got lost in thought for a second.”

“Good grief—it won’t do for you to lose your motivation just because Cecily’s not around!”

Charlotte shrugged in exasperation.

Zeke apologized quickly before returning to his original spot to guard Charlotte.

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At around the same time...

Cecily had just returned to the Snowflower Palace after finishing some chores when she noticed a woman approaching from the opposite direction.

She was a noble lady wearing a glamorous dress, accompanied by a maid. Maybe it was due to her thick makeup, but she seemed to have a spiky disposition, and Cecily held her breath as she approached.

As she had begun to relax in her new lifestyle, Cecily was slowly returning to her original bright self. This was thanks to the kindness shown by Zeke, Charlotte, and Alphonse.

Eventually, Cecily came to the noblewoman. She gave a bow as she passed, and was about to head into the Snowflower Palace when she heard a cold voice at her back.

“Good day.”

Cecily spun around in surprise. The woman was clearly talking to her.

“My name is Nora. I am the second daughter of Viscount Maignan.”

The woman spoke in a tone that suggested she knew stating her name alone would overwhelm the person she was talking to.

Cecily bowed again.

“I’m Cecily Ramps.”

“Oh my.” Nora placed her fan over her mouth in an expression of mock surprise. “Ramps, you say? Not a name I have heard of, but alas, that is probably due to my own lack of knowledge. I know not of a family with such a name.”

Cecily’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

“I’m a commoner, so it’s natural for you not to have heard of the name.”

“Oh, is that quite right! I’d assumed you were of noble birth if you were residing here in the Snowflower Palace. I do beg your pardon,” Nora said with a snicker.

Cecily wanted to hide her head from Nora’s laughter, so full of malice, but she didn’t have her overcoat with her. Nora went on, seemingly understanding

what would cause Cecily's heart the most pain.

"Deary me—those eyes really are unsettling, aren't they?"

Cecily's voice caught in her throat. But before she became unable to say anything at all, she forced words out of her dry mouth.

"Did you need something from me?"

"I'll get straight to the point. Break up with Zeke."

Cecily's heartbeat became irregular.

"Why do you ask this of me, Lady Nora?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because Zeke and I are together." Nora spat out the words in a jeering tone, as though shocked that Cecily did not know this. The lips that had said Zeke's name so lightly curled into a crescent-moon-shaped smirk. "Listen to me, Cecily the witch. You may be able to fool Zeke and the princess, but you can't fool me."

Cecily didn't even have a chance to play dumb as Nora went on.

"Zeke and I are dating. Despite that, he suddenly stopped seeing me. I expect that you've used a love potion to control his heart. Am I wrong?"

Cecily fell silent. She couldn't reply—Nora had hit the mark. However, her silence was an answer in itself.

"I can't believe it... So you *did* use a potion after all."

Cecily looked downward, but in the next moment, Nora had placed her fan under Cecily's chin. She glared at Cecily as she spoke.

"So then, you foolish little witch... Did you enjoy the playtime you obtained by trampling upon the happiness of others?"

"I-I..."

"I'm sorry," Nora said, cutting Cecily off. She left Cecily with the following words before she departed. "A false love stands no chance in the face of a love that is true. I hope you'll return him to me before long."

✧ ✧ ✧

Cecily let out a big sigh. She was in the Snowflower Palace—a luxurious place that rivaled even the castle, which did not suit such melancholic sighing. Sitting quietly upon the sofa, Cecily let out sigh after sigh. Charlotte, who Cecily had invited in, watched over her warily.

“Cecily, your emotions are changeable, aren’t they? I thought you were in good spirits recently, but here you are looking like you’re positively sick.” The pair had become fast friends and so Charlotte was able to speak to Cecily with candor. “Not only that, but why are you wearing your hood? And your eyes aren’t red anymore... Well, that color suits you too, but still.”

As Charlotte gave her usual pout, Cecily looked up with tears in her eyes.

“Lady Charlotte, can I talk to you about something?”

“About what?”

“I-It’s, um, about love.”

“About love? Did something happen between you and the captain’s loins?”

The shock was palpable in Charlotte’s expression.

“N-No, of course not. It’s about a friend of mine.”

“That means it’s about you. But choosing not to point that out is what makes a woman refined, I suppose...”

Charlotte drew her legs up onto the sofa and raised her cup of milk, swilling it like a glass of something stronger. The milk splashed onto the table, but she paid it no heed.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Cecily nodded at Charlotte, who was doing her best to look elsewhere.

“So, my friend was enjoying her time with her lover...when suddenly another woman appeared, saying that *she* was his real lover.”

Charlotte let out a disinterested sound. “I don’t really understand the details of the situation, but shouldn’t your friend ask her boyfriend’s loins outright what the situation is? It sounds like the chances of her getting cheated on are high.”

It was a fair response. With the little info she'd given, it was natural to assume Zeke was two-timing her.

"B-But he's the sort of man whom women and children find frightening. They cry when he tries to talk to them."

"Yes, but you never know. There are women in this world who fall under the blissful illusion that they're the only ones in the world who know the true face of their man, who is usually so fearsome." Charlotte paused. "Well, this advice is mostly from books I've read."

She might be right!

Cecily understood what Charlotte was saying. She had wondered why no one else had noticed Zeke's kindness, but in her heart, this special treatment towards her had made her feel a sense of superiority. Maybe Charlotte was right—maybe she was blinded to the truth by her own arrogance. The shock of this caused Cecily to slide off the sofa and fall to the ground there and then.

"Wh-Whoa, Cecily! Are you okay?"

She couldn't stand up.

So Zeke and that woman... They must be...

"Listen, Cecily. It would be faster to just ask him directly. I mean, he's not that far away."

Charlotte wasn't even bothering to hide that she knew this was about Cecily and Zeke.

Cecily glanced up in an instant and grabbed Charlotte's dress.

"C-Can we go together? I'm scared to go on my own."

"No! Why do I need to come?"

"I thought we were best friends."

"Huh?"

Best friends?!

Those two words struck Charlotte's heart.

Stifled by her overprotecting upbringing, she had never had anyone close enough to her to call a friend. The loins were all loins; her maids were simply maids. Being of royal birth, Charlotte was forced to draw a line between herself and everyone she met.

Thus, Cecily's words were the sweetest thing she could ever hear. She was, simply put, happy. That happiness momentarily drove away the fear of heading to the wyverns' grounds with all its loins.

"If you insist, then I suppose I must help. I-I suppose I could head over with you. I am your best friend, after all," Charlotte said with a little huff.

"Oh, Lady Charlotte!"

Cecily clasped her waist and held her tight. Charlotte grabbed Cecily's hands, which were shaking like a baby deer might, and they both headed to the Celestial Knight Brigade dormitory.

It was now evening. Cecily had spent hours lost in her sighing, so it had become rather late, and the knights were finishing up their daily duties.

"Lady Charlotte, I'm scared. Really scared."

"It's okay, Cecily. Relax a little, okay?"

Cecily simply let out a little moan. Her teeth were chattering. As Charlotte pulled her along, she felt more like Cecily's older sister despite being the youngest in her family. She was full of fighting spirit at having someone rely upon her for the first time in her life. She even thought she could face the scary loins that awaited them.

"Look, Cecily, a group of loins."

Cecily raised her head at Charlotte's words.

The sun had set, so the wyverns were all back in their stables. Finished with their duties, the knights were gathering in front of the dormitory. And in the middle of them was Zeke. Since he had started dating Cecily, his hard exterior had softened somewhat, so his fellow knights could now approach him without fear.

"Come on, let's go talk to him, Cecily. Huh, Cecily?"

Cecily was on the ground, completely still as if her feet were pinned down. She lowered her head in shame at Charlotte's quizzical expression.

"Lady Charlotte, I'm heading back."

"Huh?"

Charlotte thought she'd misheard Cecily. But in the next moment, Cecily let go of Charlotte's hand. It was when she had turned on her heel that Charlotte realized what Cecily had said and how serious she was.

"Hey, wait, Cecily! Don't leave me in this sea of loins!"

Cecily couldn't hear Charlotte's panicked voice. She whispered to herself.

"A coward..."

But it wasn't Zeke or Nora that she was berating as she ran away.

"I'm a coward."

A tear rolled down her cheek.

What would she gain from talking to Zeke now, anyway? He was entranced by the effects of the love potion. If Cecily asked him about Nora when he was like this, there was no chance he would say he loved Nora, or that she was his true lover. Rather, most likely, he would say that he thought nothing of her. Or that she had once been his lover, but now he didn't care for her. The love potion would cause him to speak coldly and cruelly of her for Cecily's sake.

Cecily had been about to force Zeke to say something he didn't feel just to allay her own worries. She was ashamed of herself. She was embarrassed, pathetic—she couldn't meet with Zeke like this.

"I knew this from the start." Her tears hit the ground, darkening it where they fell. "I knew that Zeke shouldn't be with me."

Not because she was a witch—there were many who didn't discriminate against witches. But Cecily had betrayed all the trust Zeke had given her, and crossed a line she should never have crossed.

When Zeke had first drunk the love potion, she should have explained the situation to someone. If she had said it was an accident, that she hadn't

intended for him to drink it, then Charlotte and Maria would surely have understood and helped her.

But now it was all too late.

Cecily roughly swiped at the tears that dampened her cheeks.

She had no time for sadness. There was a lot she needed to do.

“I need to make an antidote for the love potion.”

She needed to return Zeke to his real lover.

With this thought in her heart, Cecily put a lid on her own feelings.

Chapter 5: Parting

“No... It’s not in here!” Cecily said in despair, after flicking through the pages of a book in the castle library.

She had spoken these words louder than she’d intended, and a number of other people in the library glared daggers at her. She shrank into herself and bowed in apology.

Over the past few days, Cecily had been reading through the many books in the library.

The recipe wasn’t in the ones mom gave me so I thought it might be here, but...

Her face screwed up in disappointment.

The book laid out before her was a book of potion recipes that had been in storage in the castle. The recipes within included well-known potions as well as ones that would fetch a good price. However, even if you followed the recipes to the letter, the potions would have no effect unless their creator had magical abilities. Due to this, all this knowledge that some witch had passed down from long ago was nothing more than an unusable relic from another age. And unfortunately for Cecily, there wasn’t the faintest sign of information on an antidote for the love potion in this book.

In all honesty, Cecily wasn’t even sure if such an antidote existed in the first place. Witches simply made potions as their whims took them—Cecily doubted there was any witch before her who had wanted to make an antidote for a love potion. Even with all the recipes Cecily had seen in her own time, she hadn’t seen a single one for an antidote, for any of them.

All the same, she continued to rifle through the pages, but there wasn’t even a footnote containing any useful information.

Should I go back to my old house and ask mom?

It was possible that there might be some information among Greta’s many recipes. However, Cecily hadn’t even been exiled from her village for a year yet.

Coming home now would be against the rules. It was something she ought to use only as an absolute final resort.

“I wonder how Zeke’s doing...” Cecily murmured to herself.

Cecily hadn’t seen Zeke in two days now. She knew that she shouldn’t let her thoughts wander to him, but when she relaxed, she just couldn’t help it.

No, that wasn’t right. She was constantly thinking about Zeke—it was just that she was forcing herself to ignore it. And when she stopped focusing on ignoring those thoughts, her real emotions slipped out.

Zeke’s heart had been twisted by the love potion. Just like the princes in her picture books and fairy tales, he had used sweet words and kind actions to express his newfound love for Cecily, taking her by surprise.

But this love was different from true love.

Cecily was more than surprised when Nora had appeared that day. But if Nora hadn’t appeared, then Cecily may have ended up marrying Zeke and maybe even having a child with him in a happy future together. In this sense, perhaps it was a good thing that Nora had shown up when she did. After all, Cecily had no idea when the effects of the love potion would wear off.

How much of a shock would it be for Zeke when he finally came to his senses and it was too late to undo anything? He would be full of despair at having committed a mistake he couldn’t come back from.

“Everyone deserves the right to be with the person they actually love.”

Cecily was trying to do the right thing for them both.

“To be honest, I don’t even think Zeke is my type,” Cecily said, folding her arms and trying to lie to herself.

“Really? Then what kind of man do you like?”

“Let’s see... A blue-eyed, blond-haired prince, like the ones who appear in fairy tales. Someone who’s handsome, kind, strong, brave, caring, with a fierce look in his eye, but a warmth behind it. Someone...”

Someone just like Zeke.

...is what she was about to say, but, sensing something was off, she pursed her lips instead. She looked up and across the table...and froze as she saw Zeke standing there with a stony expression.

“Ze—”

Zeke placed a hand over Cecily’s mouth, stopping her words as she began to call his name.

At least, that’s what she expected, but in the next moment, he had lifted her up in his strong arms, and the shock of being carried like a princess caused the word to falter in her throat.

He managed to put away the recipe book that was resting on the table, returning it to its shelf, before leaving the library with Cecily still in his arms.

Filled with guilt, Cecily was all in a tizzy.

“Y-You’ve got the wrong idea. I just had something I wanted to research in the library, I wasn’t trying to avoid you...and the stuff about a blond prince with blue eyes didn’t mean anything.”

Cecily couldn’t afford to upset Zeke while he was still under the effects of the potion. Zeke’s eyes narrowed as he watched the flustered Cecily, keeping up his steady pace.

They soon came to a stop in a corner of a garden with no one else around, flowers of all colors blooming around them and filling the air with their fragrance.

Zeke gently set Cecily onto the ground.

“Cecily. I’ve got something I need to talk to you about.”

At Zeke’s unexpectedly serious manner, Cecily froze up. Zeke went on.

“I and the other knights will be heading up to the northern mountain range tomorrow to quell some magical beasts.”

“What?”

This mission for the Celestial Knight Brigade had come directly from the king himself. The northern mountain range contained a great forest of trees that

covered the border with the neighboring country to the north, and many violent magical beasts were said to lurk there.

The magical beasts had kept to themselves for a long time, but recently, more and more of them had been descending upon nearby villages and causing havoc there. As such, the Celestial Knight Brigade were being dispatched in order to fend them off.

“I’ll be leaving three of my knights behind to guard Princess Charlotte, but the rest of us will be heading out on this mission.”

That means that this mission will be rather dangerous.

It was true that Zeke was a skilled knight, but even he couldn’t prevent injuries from happening. Should the battle get particularly messy, it was even possible some knights might perish during the mission.

However, Cecily couldn’t allow her emotions to drive her response to this. Zeke had given her so much. She had lived her life with her head bowed beneath her hood, but now, thanks to Zeke, her horizons had broadened, and her world filled with color.

Even though it’s only been half a month since I met him...

Zeke had really had an undeniable effect on her life.

I at least need to see him off with a smile!

After all, Zeke Stein was a man honest and sincere enough to seek Cecily out in the library to tell her about his mission, straight from his own mouth. Cecily wanted to be someone that he could be proud of too. Even though their relationship was built on a lie, this feeling wasn’t.

“Please take care, Zeke. I want you to come home safe.” She smiled and her eyes crinkled, the corners of her lips slightly raised.

Zeke was silent, his eyes wide open in surprise. Then, in the next moment, he had embraced her small body with his own.

“Whoa!”

Cecily’s cheeks grew red. This display of affection made her tremble.

“P-Please, Zeke. Let go.”

“No.”

“C-Come on...”

She was serious—if Zeke held on any longer, it would make it harder to leave his side.

Perhaps sensing she was being serious, Zeke let her go sadly.

“Then let me see your face, at least.”

However, Zeke wasn’t about to let her go so easily. He took her cheeks in his hands as if holding a fragile object, and lifted her head up so that their faces were almost touching.

Zeke was often labeled scary or intense, but right now, he was unbearably handsome. As he looked at her with those sharp, hazel eyes of his, Cecily felt something in her chest ache.

“Ah...”

“What’s wrong, Cecily?” Zeke asked, looking at her with concern.

Cecily stood strong—but there was no way she could remain so under Zeke’s intense gaze.

“...Sorry.”

“Cecily?”

She had begun to cry.

“I’m sorry, Zeke... I’m so, so sorry.”

She wanted him to be happy—more than anyone else in this world. Even if that meant not being by his side anymore.

Yes, Cecily loved Zeke so much that she honestly wished this for him. This was a love that would stand firm, even if she had led Alphonse or Cyril to also drink love potions and came to be the target of either of their affections.

I wish Zeke would love me.

Her love potion had succeeded because of this burning desire in her heart.

And now, even more so than then, she loved him.

She loved Zeke—who worked so diligently to lead his knights and care for his wyvern as the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade, even if it meant getting less sleep.

I suppose this is what love is.

Cecily hadn't drunk a love potion herself, yet she felt that she loved Zeke far more than he did her. Her life had been without romance, despite her long-held desire for it. Now that she finally had someone that she well and truly loved, her heart was filled with joy, but also a deep loneliness.

Not wishing to be seen with her eyes full of tears, Cecily hugged Zeke tightly.

"Zeke," was all she could say.

"Cecily. I love you."

It was as if he were speaking on behalf of Cecily's emotions. He gently stroked her back.

But you don't love me, Zeke. Not really.

She wanted to tell him this, but even if she had, Zeke wouldn't accept it while still under the love potion's effects.

Cecily took a deep breath.

I'll have the antidote finished by the time Zeke returns from the northern mountain range.

Cecily was worried for Zeke's safety, but the brigade was comprised of the best knights. They wouldn't lose to some magical beasts. And without Zeke by her side, Cecily was sure she wouldn't falter, wouldn't hesitate. She could do this.

She looked up at Zeke and steeled her resolve.

"When you're back, Zeke, I have something I need to tell you."

Zeke seemed surprised but gave a big nod.

"Cecily... I'll have something I need to tell you as well."

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A cold, cutting wind blew.

Atop their wyverns, the Celestial Knight Brigade was heading to the frozen northern mountain range.

Wyverns had limitless stamina. However, their human riders didn't, so periodic breaks for eating and resting were required. These landings were more for the benefit of the humans than the wyverns.

The knights wore thick cloaks over their uniforms, and gloves for gripping the reins. However, after just half an hour in the sky, the knights were all chilled to the bone.

If they'd had to march as well, the experience would have been miserably cold, so it was a relief that they only needed to fly for this mission.

"We'll be landing for a break soon!"

Zeke lightly flicked Snow's reins.

Snow let out a cry in response to this command. There was no way everyone would have been able to hear Zeke's voice, but Snow's cry reached the other wyverns, and the knights were able to work out the meaning behind this signal from their own wyverns' physical reactions. Although the rest spots had been decided upon before departure, there were times when one of the knights was truly exhausted and an emergency rest stop was required.

Snow glided through the dusk-dyed sky as if it were water. Her tilted wings cut through the air as she began her descent.

The landing point was a portion of frozen wasteland with no houses or fields to be seen. Due to their large size, wyverns needed lots of space to land, and this was especially true when there were seventeen of them.

Snow landed gracefully, and Zeke hopped off her back before scratching her under the chin. Snow let out a contented sound as he did so.

The knights pitched tents for themselves, but as they were unable to pack tents big enough for the wyverns, the wyverns slept upon the rough ground.

After feeding the wyverns and letting them do their business, the knights finally set about preparing their own dinners. Although “dinner” might have been a bit of an exaggeration, for the meal consisted of soup and simple preserved foodstuffs like nuts and cheese.

It wasn’t a delicious feast, but the knights were used to it. They pulled their food out of their knapsacks and fueled up.

Traveling by wyvern greatly reduced the time it took to reach your destination, so they would most likely reach the northern mountain range by the next morning.

As Zeke was eating some nuts, sitting upon a nicely sized rock, a shadow appeared above him.

“Mind if I join you?”

Having no reason to refuse, Zeke nodded.

Alphonse placed himself down on the rock next to Zeke.

“You’ve been pretty gloomy recently, Zeke,” said Alphonse, cutting straight to the chase. He spoke in a low voice so that the other knights—seated around the fire—couldn’t hear him. “Even I’ve noticed. Did you have a fight with Cecy or something? I’ve hardly seen the two of you together recently. Seems like she’s been avoiding you too.”

Zeke said nothing.

“As you can see, my looks are enough to charm a girl,” Alphonse went on. “Which is why I can’t really understand how you feel. All the same, I wanna help you. Our stuffy but beloved captain’s time in the sun has finally begun—it’s completely natural that I should want to support your happiness!”

Zeke remained quiet.

“Here’s some advice from me: I wouldn’t let her go. I doubt there’s another girl like her out there who values you and thinks as much of you from the bottom of her heart as Cecy does. You’ve noticed it too—right, Zeke? Whenever she looks at you, her eyes get wet with tears. You’ll probably hit me for saying this, but it’s almost enough to make even my heart skip a beat.”

Zeke was as silent as ever.

“Oh, sorry. Am I talking too softly for you to hear? Want me to start again? Uhh, right, ahem. You’ve been pretty gloomy recently, Zeke.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“Then why are you ignoring me?!”

Alphonse stood up in exasperation.

“Vice-Captain, please keep it down! You’ll upset the wyverns!”

“Shut your trap, Cyril!”

But even as Alphonse rebuked Cyril, he sat back down on the rock, calming himself.

Watching the sparks of the fire flicker in the air, Zeke spoke evenly.

“Listen—Cecily and I haven’t fought.”

“Really? You haven’t?”

“But there’s been something I’ve been thinking about. The other day, Princess Charlotte asked me when I first developed feelings for Cecily.”

“The princess really asked that? Seriously, why were you two talking about love and stuff? I thought she hated you.” Alphonse was clearly surprised by this revelation.

“She’s started to talk to me more recently. She can’t be scared of the loins that Cecily loves, she said.”

“I really don’t understand the princess. She’s a cutie, but still...” Alphonse murmured with a tired expression.

Zeke nodded, then went on to flatly state another fact.

“She also said that your loins were particularly disgusting to her.”

“Does she realize just how many misunderstandings that phrasing invites?!”

“I’m begging you, Vice-Captain. Keep it down!”

The nuts that Alphonse threw at Cyril in the next moment struck his glasses with surprising accuracy.

“Hey! Why’d you do that?”

Cyril’s glasses had shattered with a resounding crack. But then he pulled out one of his spare pairs and simply put them on.

Zeke leaned back and looked up at the night sky as his subordinates started a commotion. Was that red-eyed young woman looking up at this same sky too? Zeke hoped so.

She seemed troubled...

Zeke had gone to see Cecily the day before he had set off. Charlotte had told him that Cecily had been frequenting the library recently, so he’d wandered around until he found her.

They hadn’t argued, but he’d sensed something was odd about her. It seemed to Zeke that she was scared of something. But all he could do was stew upon it without knowing what the problem could be.

Cecily had said that she had something to tell Zeke upon his return. And so, he resolved to come home safely so that he could ask her what it was.

“When did I start liking Cecily, huh...?” Zeke murmured to himself.

Zeke hadn’t managed to answer Charlotte that day, but he knew the answer.

“I need to tell her when I’m back.”

With the northern mountain range just a short distance away, the night passed them by.

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“This is all too sudden, Cecily.”

On a morning three days later, Charlotte and Cecily were talking by the entrance of the Snowflower Palace. Dressed in her coat, Cecily could only turn her head down and away from Charlotte’s fearsome look.

“Lady Charlotte, I really am sorry.”

Cecily was aware that it was only natural for Charlotte to be scolding her.

After all, she had only announced last night that she would be leaving the Snowflower Palace.

Since the Celestial Knight Brigade had departed, Cecily had sifted through the library's books with increased fervor, but she couldn't find any information on an antidote. Time was simply passing, and she had nothing to show for it.

Filled with a growing sense of danger, Cecily had realized she had to use her last resort—she would head back home and ask her mother, Greta, for the recipe.

"Do you have to go?" Charlotte asked yet again. Cecily nodded resolutely.

"Yes. I have to. Because of the love po—the love for my parents is making me really homesick," Cecily said, fumbling her words, her cheeks red with awkwardness. It was horrifically embarrassing for her to say, at the age of sixteen, that she was homesick. She was so embarrassed that she wanted to crawl into a hole and hide.

However, she couldn't come up with any other excuse. Fortunately, neither Charlotte nor Maria seemed to doubt what she said. Rather, Maria patted her shoulder in a gesture of support.

"It's not shameful to be homesick. It's a natural human emotion. I'm sure, just as you wish to see your parents, they, too, are wondering how their beloved daughter is doing."

Cecily didn't mind being consoled in this way, but it did make her feel uncomfortable. Meanwhile, Charlotte puffed out her cheeks in her usual pout.

"If you're homesick, then we could have arranged for a carriage to take you back."

"You've allowed me to stay for so long already—I couldn't possibly cause any more hassle."

"I don't think of it as a hassle!"

Cecily smiled, as she knew that Charlotte was telling the truth.

"Thank you, really, Lady Charlotte." No matter how much she thanked Charlotte, it wouldn't be enough. "You really are my first and only friend, Lady

Charlotte.”

Charlotte’s eyes started to glisten with tears at these words.

“This isn’t goodbye forever,” Cecily added. “I’ll be back.”

“Really? When you’re not homesick anymore, I can see you again, right?”

“Of course. A best friend wouldn’t tell a lie.”

“Okay,” Charlotte said finally, seemingly accepting Cecily’s decision.

Charlotte, Maria, and the other maids had gathered to see Cecily off. They were people who had accepted Cecily, though she was a commoner and also a witch. Cecily continued to wave until they were finally out of sight.

“It’s just the two of us again, Rolo.”

Rolo, who was walking with quiet steps by her feet, only meowed in reply.

Though she was encouraged to be accompanied by her close friend, the land outside of the palace was unknown territory for Cecily.

She applied the eyedrops that she had crafted in the palace’s kitchen a few days before. As she blinked, her eyes changed from red to a banal flaxen color, thanks to their magic.

So as to avoid unwanted eye contact with strangers, she pulled her coat close around her and departed from the castle. The bag hanging from her shoulder contained some food and water, courtesy of Charlotte.

Cecily intended to take the same public carriage that had originally brought her to the royal capital. If she didn’t have enough money, she could simply do some chores at a village along the way and so earn a bit of change. At any rate, she wanted to return to the castle as soon as she could.

“I doubt I’ll be back before Zeke comes home...”

Cecily had no way of moving faster than those wyverns.

Lost in her thoughts as she put the royal capital behind her, she suddenly felt someone tap her shoulder from behind.

“Excuse me, young lady. May I have a moment?”

“Yes?”

It happened as soon as she turned around—a single blow from behind, and Cecily’s world went dark.

Chapter 6: Cecily, Captured

Cecily let out a small groan.

A rough, warm something was licking her cheek. The sensation was most familiar.

“Rolo?”

Upon opening her eyes, Cecily saw two marble-like eyes staring down at her.

Her head was pounding. Letting out another groan, Cecily looked around her.

She was on the floor of a place that looked like an abandoned shack. Letting out a number of small coughs due to the dust, she carefully took in her surroundings.

There were a number of everyday items that looked like they hadn’t been used for years. Although the shack didn’t have any windows, a gentle light that was tinged with the color of dusk filtered in through a number of cracks in the walls. It looked like it had been over half a day since she had left the royal capital.

I remember...hearing someone call out to me.

Then she had been struck, and couldn’t remember anything after that.

Have I been captured?

The blood drained from Cecily’s face.

But who would benefit from capturing her? The only reason she could think of was that someone wanted to use her for magical abilities. According to Charlotte, even the king wanted a particular potion made by a witch, so it wasn’t out of the question.

Rolo meowed and licked at the back of Cecily’s hand. She noticed then that her ankles had been tied together. Her hands were tied in a similar fashion behind her back.

She couldn’t move. As panic began to settle in, she pleaded to Rolo, who was

stretching lethargically. Her captors might be nearby, so she spoke in a quiet voice.

“Rolo, can you bite through these ropes?”

Rolo only let out a yawn in response. It seemed this was a difficult ask of a cat.

What do I do?

Cecily was unsure what she could do. She tried to force her arms and legs free, but the rope was too secure. As she writhed on the ground, trying to get free, she heard a number of footsteps.

The old door opened with a bang.

“It seems you’re up.”

From behind two burly men appeared...

“Nora.”

Wearing a luxurious dress that was at odds with the old shack, Nora smirked.

Suppressing her surprise, Cecily looked at the men who were now behind Nora. From what she could see, there were only two of them. Maybe they worked for Nora’s family.

The forest that lay behind them was dark. It looked like the same forest that Cecily lived in, but she couldn’t say for sure.

Turning back to Nora, she asked warily, “D-Did you abduct me, Nora?”

“Yes, indeed. Do you have a problem with that?”

Cecily tried to bow her head to Nora, who was smirking again. But as she was on the ground, all she could do was adjust the angle of her neck.

“I’m so sorry!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

It seemed that Nora hadn’t expected her hostage to suddenly apologize. She was completely taken aback.

“I mean...because of me, you’ve had to resort to such extreme measures.”

Thinking back on it now, it had been some time since Nora had asked her to

break up with Zeke.

She probably thought I had zero intention of breaking up with him.

Cecily had been so focused on her own emotions that she hadn't been able to give a single thought to how Nora had felt. Because of that, Nora had been pushed to commit the violent act of abducting Cecily. Because Cecily had been hemming and hawing about what to do, Nora had been forced to commit this crime.

Regret caused the words to fall from Cecily's mouth.

"Nora, it's as you say. I did make Zeke drink a love potion."

The corner of Nora's mouth curled upward. This was probably because she was happy that Cecily had fessed up to her wicked deed all by herself.

"I really am sorry. I know this isn't something I can fix by apologizing. I'm currently looking for a recipe to craft an antidote. But my search hasn't turned up anything, so I'm on my way to ask my mother in my hometown."

Nora cut off Cecily's desperate explanation.

"There's a much quicker method than your roundabout one."

"Huh?"

If Nora knew of such a method to put things right, Cecily wanted to know what it was. However, looking up with hope in her eyes, Cecily saw nothing but the bottom of Nora's heeled shoe as it came crashing down on her head.

She could only let out a feeble cry, and Rolo hissed with his fur standing on end to see his master in such pain. However, as he leapt at Nora, Nora mercilessly threw her fan at him.

"Stay away from me, you mangy cat!"

Letting out a weak meow, Rolo shied away, hiding himself in darkness. Cecily was relieved that the fan hadn't hit him, but in the next moment, Nora began stamping on her head again with increasing ferocity.

"You might put up a kind act now, but do you realize what you did was unforgivable?"

Under Nora’s assault, Cecily couldn’t even open her mouth, let alone answer. Maybe she was bleeding, for she felt an uncomfortable sensation trickling across her head. She held her breath and closed her eyes.



“I still remember the first time I met Zeke,” Nora continued. “As I was on my way to the reception room in the royal castle for a tea party, I slipped on the stairs. Then he appeared and gallantly saved me. That was the moment we fell in love with one another.”

Nora spoke with a dreamy tone of voice, recalling her own love story. It was a sincere tale that the younger Cecily would have listened to in rapt attention.

I trampled all over Nora and Zeke’s love...

If she apologized again, then she would bear the brunt of Nora’s rage. Knowing this, Cecily could only bite her lip in silence.

Perhaps she was satisfied at having explained herself, for Nora continued speaking in a cruel tone.

“Let me tell you something, Cecily Ramps. After all, I doubt an uneducated home-wrecker such as yourself would be aware of this.”

Cecily remained silent.

“Stories reach their happy ending when the witch is killed.”

Cecily did know this. She probably knew this far better than Nora did.

She had been enchanted by all the picture books and fairy tales she had read as a child. And she had wished for a love the likes of which she’d seen in those books to one day be hers.

“If you kill me...then the effects of the love potion will wear off.”

“Exactly.” Nora nodded.

It was as Nora had said—the witches that appeared in stories were always wicked. They used their nefarious potions to cause harm to the princesses and princes, but in the end, justice was always doled out to them.

“Don’t think badly of me. This is a necessary step for me to make Zeke’s heart mine once again.”

Nora lifted her foot off Cecily’s head, and gave some orders to her men.

Cecily’s body felt oddly light, probably due to the blood that was trickling out from the wound on her head. One of the men lifted Cecily onto his shoulder.

The group left the shack and began to walk towards the forest. The pace that the men set had no trace of hesitation. It was obvious that this kidnapping hadn't been conducted on the spur of the moment, but was premeditated.

"Have you read *The Princess Who Turned into a Pig*?" Nora asked, walking beside the man who carried Cecily.

"I have," Cecily said. She hadn't wanted to answer, but she had no energy left to refuse.

"I see. How about *The Black Rose Queen*? Or *The Two Love Potions*? Or *The Prince Cursed by the Witch*?"

"I know...them all."

"Oh my, you're more well read than I imagined. If we had met under different circumstances, we might have become friends," Nora said, clearly insincere.

Charlotte had said something similar to Cecily before. But unlike back then, this time, Cecily felt nothing.

No matter the story, the witch always met the same end. It seemed that Nora had simply wanted Cecily to understand this, and to feel the fear that should accompany such a realization.

After walking for a while, they came to a break in the trees. The man roughly threw Cecily to the ground. Cecily groaned and slowly opened up her eyes to find Nora staring down at her.

"Do you know where we are?"

"By the side of a cliff."

"Exactly! The perfect cliff from which to throw a witch!"

Nora cackled with satisfaction.

From where she lay, Cecily could see the rocky edge of the cliff. The wind howling from below filled her ears. Fear trickled down the back of her neck.

Nora intended to throw Cecily off this cliff. Head over heels, all the way down to a place she couldn't even see properly from this height.

But this is the only option.

She had never managed to work out how to undo the effects of the love potion. So this was the only option.

Her only path forward was to fall from this cliff.

The rational part of her said this—and yet...

“Can I at least see Zeke one last time?”

She wanted to apologize to him properly. She wanted to admit her feelings for him, just once.

What would Zeke’s face look like if she said those three words?

Cecily hadn’t even finished making that request of Nora when she felt the push come. Suddenly, she felt as though her body was floating. It was hard to keep her eyes closed against the rushing wind, so she squeezed them tightly shut.

She would hit the rocks in mere seconds. Or maybe she would land instead on a small outcrop on the way, and eventually die from the cold.

As these thoughts entered her mind, Cecily let out a cry. She was so, so scared. Scared that she would never meet him again, which is why she couldn’t help but cry out.

“Zeke!”

She knew this shout wouldn’t be answered.

“Cecily!”

At first, she thought this was her imagination. But in the next moment, her body jolted. She slowly opened her eyes, and he filled her sight.

“Ze...Zeke?!”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

He wore a broad grin before her. Cecily couldn’t believe her eyes.

The wind was still cutting into her, but now her body was safe and stable. Zeke had one arm around her, holding her against him.

She could see the large wings of a wyvern from over Zeke’s shoulder. The

sight of those white wings stained by the setting sun was like a dream.

Cecily was still in shock from the fall, but Zeke deftly removed his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Cecily, I’m going to untie your arms and legs. Can you hold on for just a little longer?”

Cecily nodded.

Zeke unsheathed a dagger from his belt and quickly sliced through the ropes. Finally, as if he’d been holding back, he hugged Cecily. He was warm, and Cecily’s eyes glimmered as she took in the fragrance of his cologne.

“Are we riding Snow?”

“We are.”

On Zeke’s skilled command, Snow had dived from the sky to save Cecily.

Zeke let out a sigh so deep, it seemed he had emptied his lungs.

“I’m so glad I made it in time. If I’d lost you... I would’ve destroyed the whole world in my unbridled sadness.”

“No, no, Zeke. I...” Cecily shook her head as she spoke. She couldn’t hide the truth from him any longer. “I made you drink a love potion.”

Zeke’s eyes flew wide in surprise.

“And because I did, I put you under the illusion that you were in love with me, and not Nora, your lover. I’m so sorry for having done this awful thing to you...”

Cecily knew she didn’t even have the right to cry, and bit down on her lip. She was sure Zeke would rebuke her now. He would regret having saved her. But that was okay. She had finally come clean about the love potion.

“I’m sorry, Cecily, but I have a number of questions.”

Instead, Zeke seemed somewhat reticent. Cecily was puzzled by his unexpected response. With a confused expression, he put his hand to his chin.

“Who’s this Nora you mentioned?”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know anyone with that name.”

Cecily couldn’t believe her ears. What was Zeke on about?

“Nora’s Nora! Look—she’s the one on that cliff watching us!”

Well, it would have been more accurate to say that Nora was staring dumbfounded, with her jaw almost literally on the floor.

Maybe Snow understood Cecily’s intention, for she flew them closer to the cliff. Zeke squinted down at the woman for a few moments before shaking his head.

“I don’t know her.”

“No... You must be joking.”

“Listen, Cecily. I’d never lie to my darling, would I?”

Cecily became flustered as Zeke held his dashing face close to hers.

“I-I know that.”

“Exactly. I said what I said—I don’t recall ever meeting her. She’s a stranger to me.”

What’s going on?

Cecily was just as dumbfounded as Nora by this unexpected turn of events.

“There are those like you,” said a familiar voice. “People who get the wrong impression and think that they’re special just because Zeke shows a bit of kindness to them.”

Hearing these mocking words, Cecily and Zeke looked over from the air and saw that Nora and her two lackeys were being restrained by the Celestial Knight Brigade. Rolo was there too, seated upon Cyril’s shoulder. Cecily was happy they had found him.

“L-Let go of me, you scoundrel!” Nora squawked at Alphonse, glaring. Alphonse merely looked back at her with a detached expression.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t do that. You’ve been caught red-handed in an attempted murder, Lady Maignan.”

“But I’m Zeke’s lover! Let go of me this instant!”

“I’m sorry, but our captain’s not the sort of lowly man who would cheat on his partner. Anyway, you’ll be coming with us.”

“Stop that! Zeke! Save me, Zeke!”

At the sound of his name, Zeke glared down at Nora as if she were a bitter enemy.

Nora’s cheeks flushed with color as soon as he looked at her. However, Zeke spoke in a voice that was ice cold.

“I don’t know who you may be, but I can’t forgive you for harming my darling Cecily.”

“Wh-What are you talking about, Zeke? I...”

“Don’t say my name so easily. It makes me sick.”

“Wha—?!”

“Enough of that. You can complain all you like from behind bars,” Alphonse said, as he took away the wailing Nora.

Cecily could only observe the scene in complete shock.

To think that Zeke didn’t even know Nora...

So all that talk of falling in love with each other on the staircase...was all in Nora’s head?

Maybe Zeke had helped Nora out that day. After all, he kindly helped out the people he met in town, so it was likely he would have held out a helping hand to a noble lady.

However, Zeke was merely fulfilling his role as a knight. It was an everyday occurrence in his line of work, so he had probably forgotten her just as quickly.

So...am I allowed to stay in love with Zeke?

Cecily stamped out this foolishly optimistic thought.

No—the fact of the matter is still that I made him drink a love potion.

“How dare you, Cecily...?”

“Huh?”

Cecily quivered in surprise. Zeke’s comment came at the exact moment he had occupied her thoughts.

Zeke had every right to be angry at her. But he gave no chance for her to continue.

“How dare you try and leave me now, Cecily. I won’t allow it!”

“Zeke?”

He pulled Cecily in with his strong arms and hugged her tight. His words had no trace of anger in them. Rather, they were filled with an earnest desire for her.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t imagine another day without you. You wouldn’t really betray such a foolish man, would you?”

“I-I know, but...”

Cecily wanted to believe the words that were coming out of Zeke’s mouth. But she couldn’t simply say yes—the love potion had distorted his volition.

Zeke stroked Cecily’s flaxen hair with a troubled expression creasing his brow.

“I said I had something I wanted to tell you when I came back, right?”

“Y-You did.”

Cecily had come clean about the love potion. But Zeke still hadn’t told her what he wanted to say.

“I thought you wouldn’t believe what I had to say...so I brought someone you can trust.”

Someone I can trust?

“Who’s th— Ow!”

Through a rush of pain, Cecily placed her hands over her head.

“Are you hurt, Cecily?!”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing...”

Cecily was more embarrassed than anything. She looked at Zeke—it seemed

he was uninjured. Good. She didn't care about herself. Seeing that he was unharmed was the happiest news she could have received.

"I'm so glad you're not hurt. Welcome home."

Zeke's breath caught in his throat.

"I'm home, my Cecily."

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Zeke placed a kiss upon Cecily's cheek. After this delicate act, Cecily pulled back, and Zeke spoke again.

"Let's go back to the Snowflower Palace and I'll get you all patched up." He paused. "Cecily?"

"Zeke... I have a question."

"Yeah?"

"When you said you weren't popular with the ladies... You were lying, weren't you?"

Surely, it must have been a lie. Cecily pouted as she looked up at Zeke, her cheeks red like two apples.

Zeke merely laughed and shrugged.

"I told you I'd never lie to you, my Cecily. Right?"

At Zeke's command, Snow flew off towards the castle.

From above, it looked like Cecily had been right to assume she had been taken to the forest near the castle. The spires of the castle came into view, and then, in the next moment, they were already at the wyverns' grounds.

After circling the ground for a short while, they landed upon the grass. Cecily took Zeke's hand and placed her feet back on the ground.

Then she heard a voice call out to her.

"Cecily!"

Cecily looked up to see who it was, and spotted a figure waving at her as they drew closer.

"No way..."

Cecily rubbed her eyes. There was a woman coming towards her along with Charlotte, Maria, and the maids of the Snowflower Palace.

The woman had scarlet hair and flaming-red eyes. Porcelain skin. Refined features. A slim figure... And a most bewitching smile. “Hey! It’s been a while, my lovely Cecily.”

“Mom?!”

As Cecily’s mother, Greta, approached, she gave her daughter, whom she hadn’t seen in a year, a big wink.

Chapter 7: The Truth behind the Love Potion

Greta looked Cecily up and down and laughed at her daughter's utter shock.

"Cecily, my dear, you've grown even more darling."

"Wh-Why are you here, mom?"

"Well... Hold on—you're bleeding. What happened?" Greta said, her expression growing concerned.

"A noble lady who was under a terrible delusion stamped on me."

"I see! Well, in that case..." Greta pulled a bottle out of a pocket in a flash. "Close your eyes just a second, Cecily."

"O-Okay."

The request was sudden, but Cecily wouldn't turn down an order from her mother. Greta opened the bottle and sprinkled some green powder over Cecily's head. Everyone watching was visibly confused, but Cecily began to notice a change taking place.

"The pain and the throbbing in my head... It's going away!"

A ripple of whispers passed through the onlookers.

"What was that?" Zeke asked.

"It's a medicine that can completely fix you up if someone stamps on your head."

"That seems rather niche... Hold on, it might actually be useful when taking on some magical beasts."

Zeke and Greta seemed to be having a friendly conversation.

I see. The person Zeke said I could trust was actually mom.

All the same, Cecily wondered where and when the two of them had met. Cecily looked away from her mother and noticed Charlotte staring intensely at

Greta, with her hands clutched tightly together.

“I know this was said earlier, but seeing you both together, I can really tell that you are Cecily’s mother. Although, it’s strange—you have the same red eyes, but Greta’s enchanting allure is a weapon that Cecily totally lacks.”

Cecily was a bit taken aback by Charlotte’s rude comment, but it wasn’t as if she could deny it. Greta, on the other hand, never one to miss a compliment, gave a bewitching smile.

“I’m honored, Princess Charlotte. If Your Royal Highness so wishes...I can impart some of this power to you.”

“Really?! You’d teach me such enchanting tricks?”

Greta chuckled. “If you manage to master this womanly weapon, then your having the title of the most beautiful woman in the kingdom will be a true understatement.”

As Cecily watched her mother speak with Charlotte, a group of knights arrived. Among them were Alphonse and Cyril. It seemed like they had finished locking away Nora and her two subordinates.

“Now then, back to the matter at hand,” Zeke said. He cleared his throat and turned to face Cecily. “Cecily, I encountered Greta on a restocking stop at a village on the way back from our mission.”

Zeke gave a simple explanation of what had happened. While the Celestial Knight Brigade were restocking their supplies, Greta—who was nearby—had called out to Zeke and asked him to take her to the Snowflower Palace, where Cecily was.

“Wait—how did you know where I was, mom?”

Had she used some kind of potion that allowed her to track Cecily’s movements? What Greta said next surprised Cecily.

“Rolo told me. He has been using a simple spell in order to give me periodic updates on your well-being. I realized that I couldn’t leave you in such dire straits, so I came racing from the village to help.”

“Wait a second—Rolo told you? But he’s just a cat.”

Rolo had returned sitting on Cyril's shoulder, but now he was walking around Greta's ankles, pressing his head into her legs.

"Listen, Cecily. Witches don't own your regular, run-of-the-mill black cats, you know. Rolo belongs to a species of magical beast that can use magic."

"Rolo's a magical beast?!"

Cecily's eyes shot to Rolo, but he didn't even register her gaze.

"But he only meows at me!"

"That's because you're still an immature witch, Cecily."

Cecily couldn't help but feel a sting of pain at how matter-of-factly Greta said this.

So, does that mean Rolo has understood everything I've said until now, and has only been acting the part of a cat?

As Cecily processed this new information, Greta stared firmly at Cecily.

"I knew you were an introverted girl, but to think you'd spend almost an entire year living alone deep in the woods like that..."

Cecily could only let out a sad groan in response. Her bright idea of *not* journeying the world and simply whiling away her two years of exile had been known to Greta since the start. She fidgeted anxiously.

"Th-There was a good reason for that..."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure. More importantly, Rolo tells me that you made a love potion."

Cecily froze up.

"A love potion?"

"What's she talking about?"

The knights shared glances, murmuring amongst themselves. Ignoring them completely, Greta nodded with satisfaction.

"You were so against the idea of love potions, saying that they were immoral, yet you still made one yourself. That's my daughter for you."

Subjected to such embarrassment in front of everyone, Cecily couldn't stay silent a moment longer.

"Stop that now, mom!"

Cecily leapt at her mother to restrain her, but found herself in Greta's clutches instead.

"So, who's the lucky man you fed the love potion to? Tell your mom! I want to hear all about your romantic stories, daughter dear!"

"Ow, ow, ow! Mercy! Mercy!"

"Cecily!" Zeke approached Cecily, whose wrists were clutched in Greta's tight grip. "Mother, please stop that. Can't you see Cecily's in pain?"

"Yes, yes, but... Hold on, did you say 'mother'?"

Greta loosened her grip as she stared at Zeke. Slipping free, the frightened Cecily allowed Zeke to take her into his safe embrace.

"It's okay now, Cecily. I'll protect you."

Cecily began to whimper, without a care as to who was watching. Zeke held her tenderly. Meanwhile, Greta gazed at the pair with a strange look in her eye.

"Hmm..."

Greta's eyes narrowed as she continued to stare at the pair. Her gaze was so unwavering that even the sobbing Cecily could ignore it no longer. Or maybe it would have been more accurate to say that she was starting to feel a flush of embarrassment as she came back to her senses. After all, being affectionate with your lover in front of your own mother was an act that required some guts. To be fair, though, her mother was the same woman who unabashedly acted lovey-dovey with her husband in front of Cecily.

"Yes, mom? Was there something else you wanted to say?"

"Cecily. Did you really make a love potion?"

Cecily hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"Okay. And who did you make drink it?"

"Well, I didn't *make* him drink it per se. Rather, he drank it himself."

“If you don’t tell me straight, I’ll twist your lips until you do.”

Cecily let out a squeak of fright. As Greta’s pinching fingers approached, Cecily swiftly avoided the attack while still in Zeke’s embrace.

“Please, mother. Cecily’s lips exist for the purpose of being kissed by me!”

They do?!

Of course, they did not. At any rate, Cecily released herself from Zeke’s arms and told the truth.

“About twenty days ago, I accidentally made Zeke drink the love potion. I say I made him, but in truth, I’d wanted to throw it away. However, Zeke thought it was some kind of liquor and decided to drink it of his own accord, saying that it would be a waste to discard. He began acting strangely after that.”

Cecily was certain everyone would berate her for what she’d done. Despite that, however, the eyes of the crowd didn’t fall upon her gloomy expression but instead on Zeke.

“The captain’s loins are stupid, huh.”

“Ha ha ha. Zeke, you’re a real idiot, aren’t ya?”

“Al, head back to the dormitory and clean it from top to bottom.”

“You heard him, Princess Charlotte. Let’s make it spick-and-span.”

“Why do I have to help?!”

Wait... They’re not angry? They just think Zeke is stupid?

“Twenty days ago, you say...? In that case, even if he had drunk it, the effects would have long since worn off.”

However, Cecily could no longer focus on the scene around her. Greta had said something incredibly shocking like it was no big deal.

“Wait, mom. What did you just say?”

“It’s just as I said. If dear Zeke here had drunk a love potion, then the effects would have worn off a long time ago.”

Cecily stared at her mother without moving a muscle. Greta continued in a

singsong voice.

“My dear, love potions don’t last for years on end. The love potion I worked so hard to concoct for my own darling only lasted three days.”

“Only three days?!”

“Exactly. I intended it as a three-day little bit of fun, but he ended up telling me that he’d always loved me and that he wanted to get married. Talk about a bother. But I love him more than anything now, so all’s well that ends well.”

“How passionate!” Charlotte said, flushing.

However, Cecily’s distress ran deep. She didn’t have the mental wherewithal to listen excitedly to her parents’ love story.

What’s going on?

If what Greta had said was true, then the effects of the love potion Cecily had made had long since worn off.

Cecily looked over at Zeke, who was standing behind Greta with a bewildered expression of his own. As their eyes met, Zeke gave her a little smile and tilted his head. In the gesture was a gentle question—*is there something you wanted to ask?*

Pushing down the tenderness she felt at this sight, Cecily forced her gaze back to her mother.

No—the effects of the love potion had to still be ongoing. She couldn’t think of any other answer. There was no other explanation for why Zeke, who had been so hard and serious, now so openly bared his affections for Cecily.

“By the way, Cecily—did you create the love potion exactly as the recipe I gave you instructed?”

“Of course,” Cecily said. But as she nodded, she remembered something. “Well... If I’m being honest, I used a few substitutions for the frog’s blood and lizard’s tail and stuff...”

“Substitutions, you say?”

Cecily racked her memories. “Like tomatoes from my allotment. And burdock

root...”

Greta stared at Cecily in silence with her smile frozen upon her face.

“You can’t make a love potion with things like that,” she said bluntly.

“You can’t?!”

Panic filled Cecily’s breast. She had been so happy when she’d completed her potion, but now she was being told that using tomatoes and burdock root wouldn’t work?! If that was the case, then the recipe should have said so!

“Cecily, my dear, it seems you’ve inherited your father’s stupid side. But that’s okay, because that’s what makes you adorable. My silly girl.”

Greta stroked Cecily’s head. Cecily felt a rush of happiness at this old, familiar act.

“Cecily. Can you tell me what you used, as best as you can remember?”

“O-Of course. Let’s see...”

Cecily whispered in her mother’s ear as she listed off the ingredients she’d used.

“Really? You put that in? My, oh my...”

Zeke could only look on in confusion until the explanation was over, listening all the while to Greta scolding her daughter with these little comments.

“I see,” said Greta at last. “I think I know what happened.”

“Greta,” Alphonse said. “What did Cecy end up feeding to old Zeke here, then? Burdock root and tomato juice?”

Greta looked over at the man in question. The intense stare seemed to make Zeke feel rather awkward.

“Not a love potion, that’s for sure. What Cecily made,” Greta said, raising her forefinger in a seductive manner, “was a potion that will make the drinker completely and utterly honest with the person who made them drink it.”

“What?”

“In other words, a truth serum. I read that in the old days, they forced

criminals to drink it. However, it ended up being banned and buried in the annals of time because those who drank it ended up with a terribly upset stomach because of its disgusting taste."

Everyone present fell utterly silent. However, Zeke alone was nodding along, as if it all made complete sense.

Cecily, as shocked as anyone else there, plucked up the courage to speak. "But that doesn't make sense, mom. I'd only met Zeke once in passing before, but as soon as he drank the potion he kept saying I was pretty, again and again, before asking that we date! How could it have been anything but a love potion?"

If Zeke had really drunk a potion that would make him become honest, then surely he wouldn't have made such advances, or asked her to date him.

"I expect that Zeke had fallen for you before you made him drink the potion."

Are you serious?!

Cecily cast her mind back to how Zeke had acted that day. He had been curt and a bit uncouth, but well-meaning. He'd had a sad look in his eye as he explained how girls feared him. He hadn't been particularly rude or anything, but on the day they'd first met, he hadn't put on any airs and hadn't shown any particular interest in Cecily.

"No... He didn't seem that way at all."

"Don't tell *me* that. He's right here, so why don't you ask him? Hey, Zeke! What did you think of Cecily when you met her?"

Zeke didn't answer for a short while. However, he didn't seem angry about the fact that Cecily had made him drink a completely mysterious liquid. His hazel eyes were fixed upon Cecily and she stared back—although they weren't hugging anymore, the intensity of his stare caused Charlotte to blush again. With their faces so close together, everyone wondered if they were about to kiss, but from Zeke's lips instead came a simple confession.

"I've thought Cecily was pretty since the day I met her."

Cecily's mouth opened in surprise. However, as Zeke stopped there, Alphonse

chimed in with a hand raised, unable to bear the silence.

“He’s telling the truth, Cecy. I can vouch for him.” All eyes fell on Alphonse as if to ask how he knew this. He scratched his cheek and went on. “You see, I actually met up with Zeke the day after he met you at the knickknack shop.”

Cecily knew this. However, it seemed like she had only heard half the story...

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In the corner of an almost empty cafeteria...

“Watch yourself, Zeke. They say witches are known to use shady potions to control people’s emotions. Even someone like you wouldn’t stand a chance if you drank one.”

After hearing that his friend had saved a young witch in town the day before, Alphonse delivered this warning to Zeke.

Zeke was the third son from a merchant family who had purchased baron status, and Alphonse was the third son of a count. Although both were third sons, their family situations were totally different.

Many rumors had long dogged Alphonse, who put on airs around women. It was Alphonse’s father who’d recommended that he join the Celestial Knight Brigade. The man had been struggling to deal with this son of his who, while talented, didn’t take anything very seriously. He had hoped that this troublesome boy would change for the better if he joined the famously tough Celestial Knight Brigade.

However, upon joining, Alphonse had had a negative reaction to it almost immediately. He was fed up at being in a brigade solely comprised of men, and also with Zeke, who—despite being a new recruit himself—was already exhibiting immense talent. The pair were like water and oil. Every time they met they started arguing, and their constant verbal spats made everyone else shrink away in fright.

What changed their relationship was a gradual, mutual understanding over the years—that although Zeke was harsh to others, he was even harsher to himself, and that despite Alphonse’s joking demeanor, his nature at its core was hardworking and diligent.

This argumentative pair gradually became friendly rivals, then true friends, and then stalwart allies who trusted each other with their lives. And now they had reached the positions of being captain and vice-captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade.

I don't want my buddy Zeke getting his heart stolen away by a witch.

Alphonse was filled with this fierce desire to protect his blockheaded friend from danger.

"Got it. I'll watch out."

Zeke's reply was frank and simple, and Alphonse breathed a sigh of relief. However, it was too soon for him to relax.

"But to be honest, she won't even need to control my emotions. I'm already taken with her."

"Excuse me?"

Alphonse doubted his ears. With his mouth frozen in a smile, he turned to Zeke.

"Ha ha ha... I must be getting old. I didn't catch what you just said."

"I said she won't need to control my emotions. After all, I'm already taken with her."

"Huh? What? Seriously? You're not pulling my leg?"

"Like I'd have a reason to lie."

Alphonse felt his brain shut down as Zeke said this in a matter-of-fact way.

"But hold on. That's not enough to make me believe you! I mean, *the* Zeke Stein? Being attracted to a woman?"

"Yeah. It happened. Even though women always end up running away from me..."

Zeke was a good man. As soon as he had heard that they needed more guards in town yesterday, he had headed to the city without a moment's hesitation and had patrolled without showing a sign of exhaustion. However, this kindness and sense of justice were unfortunately at odds with his appearance.

In the past, when Zeke had reached out to an old woman carrying a heavy load, she had shrieked in fear and then run off. Once, a mother soothing her child had started crying too after seeing Zeke. There was even a time when a lost child had run away from Zeke and went to the local guard, begging to be saved.

Alphonse often joked about this sort of thing and teased Zeke about it, but in truth, it made him angry. No one tried to see Zeke for who he was. They wouldn't even try to learn what he was really like, and instead looked at him with prejudice.

However, Zeke spoke with a slight smile on his lips.

"She wasn't scared of me."

"Really?"

"She came chasing after me after I saved her at the store. But...she *did* suddenly start crying out of the blue, in the end."

"You sure she wasn't scared?" Alphonse said nervously. But Zeke shook his head.

"I thought she might've been at first, but I don't think so, you know. She was crying with an expression of relief. As I saw her cry—and I know this isn't fair to her—I felt kind of happy."

"Uh-huh," Alphonse said. He'd gotten lost in Zeke's story without noticing it. "And that's when you fell for her?"

"I...think so. It's all a bit simple though, don't you think?"

"Well, that's just what love is, I guess," Alphonse said as he shrugged.

Alphonse had a girl he was interested in as well. However, he was at a loss as to how to even approach the matter. It was weird—he never felt this nervousness when talking to other girls.

Zeke's first love, huh?

Zeke was earnest in whatever he did, so Alphonse was sure he would passionately throw himself into romance with all he had as well. All Alphonse could do was support him without overstepping his bounds—along with the

occasional bit of teasing.

“Okay, I get it now. That’s why our venerable captain made his way into town today—just for the sake of seeing this girl!”

“Enough of that,” Zeke said with a snort, before bringing his glass of chilled water to his lips.

✧ ✧ ✧

“That’s about how it went. Ha ha ha... It’s a bit embarrassing relating it all now.”

Cecily was in shock as she listened to Alphonse chortle at the end of his tale.

I didn’t realize that’s how the rest of their conversation went...

Cecily had been so struck dumb by shock that day that none of what they had said after that point had entered her ears.

Zeke had been silent until then, but now spoke up in a quiet voice.

“I didn’t manage to meet you that day, but when I happened to bump into you the day after that and you invited me to dinner, I was really happy. I was so overjoyed that I was probably quite a sight, huh? Then, when you said that you’d brought me a present, my joy reached its breaking point. I know you tried to stop me, but I ended up drinking every last drop of that bottle.”

Zeke summed up their encounter, which went more or less as Cecily remembered it, although the parts where he was overjoyed were news to her. Zeke paused for a moment and looked at Cecily before going on.

“When I drank that red liquid and woke up, I felt as if my vision had opened up before me.”

“Huh?”

“That potion you made, Cecily—the one that makes people honest... After drinking it, my heart felt strangely light. When I thought that you were pretty, the words came spilling out of my mouth. I was really happy that I could express my thoughts so easily.”

Cecily had no idea that this was what Zeke had been thinking about while she had been inwardly berating herself.

“Hmm,” said Alphonse. “Would you really say such sugary sweet things one after the other just because you drank an honesty potion?”

“You would. He’s not *your* pair of loins, after all.”

“Hear that? As Princess Charlotte says, you’re not *my* loins, Zeke.”

Stating this in reaffirmation of what Charlotte had said, Alphonse didn’t notice every woman around him smacking their foreheads with their palms.

“What I’m curious about is, where did Zeke learn all those methods of expressing his love for Cecy?”

“I think I know, Vice-Captain,” said Cyril.

“Please go on.”

Cyril pulled a book from his pocket with a glint in his eye.

“This is one of my romance novels. It’s called *The Ignorant Prince’s Love Story*.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding, man. It says the author is Cee Rill.”

“That’s me. Cee Rill.”

“I’ve read every one of your books! I’m a big fan!” Charlotte said, with stars in her eyes. Cyril, AKA Cee Rill, bowed his head with a shy “Thank you.”

“Anyway,” Cyril went on, “the captain also reads my novels. And some of the stuff he’s said to Cecily seems a little similar to some of the lines in my books!”

“Hold on a sec—you said you write romance novels?”

“Yep. Romance with a capital R.”

“Mr. Cee Rill, can you sign my copies?”

“Of course, Princess Charlotte. I’d be happy to hear your thoughts on my manuscripts too.”

“Yes, please! I’d love to read them!”

In a moment, Charlotte had started speaking to Cyril with a lot more

reverence.

“You should totally read them too, Cecily. Mr. Cee Rill’s novels are so good.”

“Maybe, but I’ve only read picture books and fairy tales before...”

Cecily didn’t even try to hide her nervousness. The book that Cyril had in his hand seemed worlds away from the children’s books she had read until now.

“It’s okay. Everyone has that kind of transitional period,” Charlotte said with fervor. “Novels really are amazing. I’m not good with loins, but when I read romance novels, I’m not scared of the hero’s loins that appear!”

Charlotte’s impassioned invitation would probably have convinced no one except people like herself to read them. Regardless, Cecily gave a shallow nod.

“I see. I’ll read them if I get the chance.”

“Really?”

Charlotte, who didn’t have any friends, didn’t realize that this was akin to a polite no. She looked happy as she went back to talking to Cyril.

Alphonse watched the scene somewhat uncomfortably, and soon, even Greta joined in, merely adding to the chaos.

With the attention off of her, Cecily started to think. It was clear that Zeke hadn’t drunk a love potion. He had simply been saying what was on his mind honestly. Which meant...

“So, can I stay in love with Zeke?”

Cecily murmured this to herself quietly without expecting a response, but Zeke hadn’t missed her small voice.

“You can.”

He reached out and took Cecily’s hand.

“So, do you mind saying it to me?”

Cecily felt the tension that she had been holding for so long gradually dissipating.

She looked up at Zeke and nodded. She could finally reveal her true feelings—

say those words that she had never said, though he had said them to her so many times.

“Ahem. I love you, Zeke.”

Cecily smiled as tears came to her eyes.

“And I, you.”

Their first kiss was so warm that Cecily felt her heart melt there and then.



Epilogue: The Truth behind the Love Potion (Extra Scene)

A few hours later...

Cecily was back in the Snowflower Palace, in a room by herself. After all, the Celestial Knight Brigade had just come back from their mission in the northern mountain range. They had finished their mission report at the castle, but they now needed to recover from the pent-up exhaustion after traveling, battling magical beasts, and sleeping rough. Rest came before chatting.

As for Zeke, he had finished his reports too, then gone off to take a shower to get rid of the sweat from his long journey. Cecily was waiting impatiently, hoping he would return at any moment.

He said he had something he wanted to talk about in private...

Even a minute—a second—without Zeke seemed to last an eternity.

A knock broke the silence. Cecily got up and rushed to the door, and there Zeke was.

“Sorry you’re seeing me like this...”

“It’s fine.”

Cecily nonchalantly took Zeke’s hands in her own, but secretly her heart was racing.

Zeke’s hair was still wet, and his cheeks were red from the hot water. Maybe he was feeling warm, for his white shirt was open at the top. His collarbone, broad chest, and pecs, which were usually hidden, were on full display, and Cecily couldn’t help but feel dizzy.

H-He’s amazingly cool.

Zeke was devastatingly handsome. Cecily didn’t know who’d come up with that turn of phrase, but Zeke was the very picture of it.

She smiled at Zeke before closing the door. Zeke sat on the bed, and she sat

down too, a little distance from him.

They remained in silence for a little while, though Cecily couldn't help but glance over at Zeke. More accurately, at his lips.

I can't believe I kissed him!

At the end of the fairy tale, the princess and the prince would kiss. That was how it always went.

Their gentle, storybook-like kiss had been enough to set Cecily's heart racing. She was proud of herself for not fainting there and then.

They were on the same page now, yet Zeke had something he needed to tell her. Cecily fidgeted nervously before Zeke spoke in a quiet voice.

"You tried to get me to drink a love potion, huh...?"

Cecily jumped in surprise. Although the mixture had been more akin to a tomato and burdock root juice (with some cut-up hemp rope), the fact of the matter was that Cecily had made what she thought was a love potion, and wanted Zeke to drink it.

"I really am sorry, Zeke..."

Cecily turned to Zeke and bowed her head in apology. In all honesty, it wasn't Nora or anyone else Cecily should have apologized to, but Zeke.

Even if it wasn't actually a love potion, it doesn't change the fact that I made it with the aim of getting him to drink it.

"Cecily, raise your head. I'm not scolding you. I...think you're incredible."

"Me? Incredible?"

Cecily looked at Zeke with confusion. Before she could ask what he meant, Zeke went on.

"You plucked up your courage to invite me to dinner to get me to drink this potion. But what about me? I wanted to meet you again, it's true, but I didn't even think to invite you to dinner or anything like that."

Cecily listened in silence.

"The existence of our relationship is all thanks to you. If you hadn't gotten me

to drink that honesty potion, I would never have been able to tell you how I felt. Things would have ended with all of these thoughts—that you were pretty, or that I liked you—simply remaining buried at the bottom of my heart."

Thus, Zeke laid his feelings bare to Cecily. It must have taken real courage to expose these thoughts to her. He seemed so wonderful in this moment, but Cecily restrained those emotions and simply put her hand over Zeke's. It was still warm from the bath.

"I know, but... But I'm the same way."

"Cecily?"

"You might get angry with me for this, but if you hadn't said anything to me then, I think that day would have ended without me saying anything either."

Zeke's face crumpled into a soft smile.

"Then...that potion was a necessary ingredient for our relationship"

He squeezed Cecily's hand.

"But I'm a pitiful man. To think I couldn't explain my feelings without the help of a magic potion..."

"That's not true..."

"I'm...scared. Scared of what will happen when the effects of this potion run out. You might hate me if I become someone who can't express himself."

Neither of them knew how long the effects of the potion would last. When would they come to an end? Today? Tomorrow? Or maybe a few seconds from now?

But Cecily shook her head.

"All of your honest feelings that you've shared with me until now are my treasures. That's not all. Nothing changes the fact that you're kind, and I love that side of you."

It was true that Zeke's passionate words and actions had been intense and often put her at his mercy, but it wasn't solely that which had caused Cecily to fall for Zeke. Cecily didn't care if Zeke one day ended up becoming a silent

person. If saying he loved her or he thought she was pretty ended up being something that required so much effort on his part, then she would simply gather those precious few words together like flowers, and treasure them.

“If you end up becoming a quiet person, then I’ll just talk enough for the both of us! I’ll say ‘good morning’ or ‘I love you’ as much as you like. Every day, lots and lots. So don’t be so hard on yourself, Zeke. It’s not your fault that you can’t be so honest all the time. Please don’t hate yourself.”

Zeke’s hazel eyes began to swim.

“Cecily...”

But in the next moment, a loud bang came from the window.

Cecily let out a scream and instinctively grabbed onto Zeke. Whatever it was had ruined their delicate moment. Had a bird crashed into the window?

“What happened?”

A voice came in through the window.

“Cecily! I know a beautiful woman like myself shouldn’t interrupt a conversation between lovers—sorry!”

“Mom?!”

It was Greta. Her bewitching silhouette could be seen through the curtain. She began to speak quickly.

“There was something important I forgot to tell you. It’s about the potion that will make the drinker completely and utterly honest with the person who made them drink it. Its effects only last half a day or so.”

“Really?!”

“It was originally made for confessions, so that’s no surprise, huh? Anyway, see you later!”

Greta’s silhouette gradually faded away. The weirdness of the situation was compounded by the fact that they were up on the second floor...

Left in silence, the pair looked at each other.

Cecily was in shock, but Zeke was smiling. Cecily placed her hands in front of

her to try to tamp down on the strange mood that had settled over them.

“H-Hold on. Does that mean that you were back to normal the day after that dinner? Not affected by a love potion *or* an honesty potion?”

“Now that you mention it, I think so. Although I think it’s true that the honesty potion has caused me to speak more honestly in general.”

So that means everything Zeke has said to me until now...

Cecily was starting to realize something quite amazing.

Zeke took Cecily’s hand as she was in thought and laid a kiss upon her palm. She quivered in shock—her hand was more sensitive than she’d realized.

She stared up at Zeke with an expression that said *knock it off*, but he placed more kisses over her palm, and at the base of each finger. Almost as if he wouldn’t be satisfied without having loved every part of her.

Cecily’s breath came in fits and bursts at this display of physical intimacy.

“St-Stop it, Zeke!”

“Why?”

“B-Because I’ve only experienced romance through my picture books! I-I’ve never done anything past a kiss!”

Theirs had been a romantic and innocent kiss. It was the pinnacle of Cecily’s happiness so far.

But every time Zeke touched her, she felt electricity running through her. Her picture books had said nothing about this.

“Neither have I. But I’d like to learn what comes next with you.”

“Y-You say that, but— Eep!”

Zeke’s hand was stroking her cheek.

Goosebumps rippled over Cecily’s back. Her little scream wasn’t ladylike in the slightest.

She felt scared, like she wanted to run away. But her body wouldn’t move. Completely entranced, Cecily let her flaxen hair be stroked by Zeke. All her

senses were focused on the places where his hands touched her.

“I-I-I need to make it quickly!”

“Make what?”

Having completely lost control of herself, Cecily shouted her next words. “A potion that will calm down a certain man who’s far too assertive!”

Zeke was taken aback, but only for a moment, for then he started to chuckle.

“That won’t work on a guy like me.”

“Wh-Why?”

Cecily pouted. Zeke whispered into her ear in a low, gravelly voice.

“I told you that day, didn’t I, Cecily? Our deep love for one another will only accelerate.”

Cecily could only make a frustrated sound in reply.

Zeke’s face came even closer, as if to tell her she shouldn’t fight her feelings any longer. It was then that Cecily understood something. Although Greta had said otherwise, Cecily was sure that the two of them wouldn’t need any kind of potion to help them out again.

Extra Story 1: Unknown Feelings

Charlotte looked out the window and let out a melancholic sigh. She gazed at the cloudy sky with a despondent look that was unsuited to a girl of fourteen years.

It looked like it was going to rain today. The foot of the mountains was covered in mist, and even the air in her room felt damp.

However, it wasn't the coming weather that was playing on Charlotte's mind.

"A love potion, huh...?"

Her thoughts were full of the potion that Cecily had tried to make.

Cecily, with her witch's blood, had tried to concoct a love potion to give Zeke, who hadn't openly shown any indication of romantic feelings towards her. Cecily's mother, Greta, had also successfully concocted a love potion and given it to the man who was now her husband.

"Do people start to desire love potions when they fall in love, I wonder...?"

Charlotte still knew nothing of love and romance, so she couldn't understand what had driven Cecily and Greta to do what they had done.

Of course, Charlotte did want to fall in love one day, but she was still terrified of men. Not only that, she knew her royal status prevented her from being able to fall in love with whomever she would like. It was possible that one day she would be used in a political marriage and wed to a prince of another country.

Charlotte didn't view herself as particularly misfortunate, but when she thought of Cecily, who had fought to seize happiness with her own two hands, she was filled with a strange emotion.

"If I may, Princess Charlotte... Is there someone you want to feed a love potion to?"

Charlotte gasped in surprise.

She had completely forgotten there was a knight currently in the room with her, on guard duty. He had been completely quiet as he leaned against the wall.

Her maids had gone off to deal with some tasks, and so it was just the two of them at the moment. Charlotte's attitude towards men had softened somewhat in recent days, so her maids sometimes ended up leaving her alone.

Charlotte must have let her guard down as well. Otherwise, she wouldn't have forgotten she was alone with a man, even if he were only standing there in silence.

"I-I don't want to hear your insolence, you foolish pair of loins!"

"I'm quite sorry for my insolence, Princess," the knight replied with a chuckle. Charlotte glared at him—at Alphonse, the vice-captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade. She didn't know how to deal with him—this third son of a count and a complete womanizer.

Although Zeke had originally been hard to approach due to his rather vicious demeanor, he was surprisingly easy to talk to, and whenever she heard him speak of Cecily, Charlotte couldn't help but feel a warmth in her chest.

However, Alphonse was different. He was, as his appearance suggested, just a dissolute man. Every time she saw him in the castle, he was with a different noble lady. A playboy like him topped Charlotte's list of most detestable loins.

"Are you sure you don't need a love potion? I can go and fetch one for you, if you so wish."

Charlotte pouted angrily at Alphonse's teasing. But not wanting to be called childish, she drew her rose-gold hair over her mouth to hide her expression. Unfortunately, she wasn't aware that this act in itself was childish.

"I-I don't need a love potion, thank you. I don't even have anyone I'd like to give it to. Even if by some kind of mistake I *did* have someone I did like, then I would simply learn the madam's enchanting tricks," Charlotte said brusquely.

Ever since their meeting, Charlotte had taken a real shine to Greta, and thus she now spoke highly of the woman. Enchanting allure to capture the hearts of men... Most girls would want to master such tricks themselves.

The madam truly is an incredible woman.

Just like Cecily, Greta was currently staying at the Snowflower Palace as a

welcomed guest. The three of them had enjoyed a tea party the day before, and Charlotte loved spending time with them—which made the occasions when she was alone feel even lonelier.

“Enchanting tricks, you say,” Alphonse said, with a somewhat dark expression. What was he trying to say? Charlotte grew more annoyed.

In almost every situation, Alphonse was overly talkative. She had even tried to get rid of him before by complaining to Zeke that someone so chatty couldn’t possibly be focusing on guarding her. Yet, maybe because Zeke looked down on her or simply hadn’t gotten the message, Alphonse was still chosen to guard her. This was a complete nuisance to Charlotte.

Pulling her hair together, Charlotte looked away from Alphonse.

“W-Well, stupid loins like you wouldn’t need a love potion. The girls come to you without your even needing to do anything.”

How pitiful, indeed. The girls who flocked to Alphonse were like butterflies in desperate desire for a beautiful flower’s nectar. Tears came to Charlotte’s eyes as she thought of these women.

Alphonse stared at Charlotte with a curious concern in his eyes. Wondering what would come out of his mouth next, Charlotte looked back warily.

“Your Royal Highness, are you sulking?”

“Excuse me?”

“It seemed to me you were jealous about how popular I am with the ladies.”

Come again?

Charlotte could only flap her lips like a fish out of water.

What did he mean? Jealous? Me*? Hold on—is he really saying that I’m jealous?*

What an incomprehensible joke.

“D-Don’t get the wrong end of the stick. I was merely pitying those poor girls whom you dupe.”

“Is that right? I’m sorry, I thought—”

“Sh-Shut up, shut up, shut up! I’ve had enough! Leave me alone! Your loins are giving me an earache! I wish Mr. Cee Rill was guarding me instead of you!” Charlotte screeched in rage.

Charlotte was usually a demure princess. It was rare to see her make a scene like this. However, when she was with Alphonse, Charlotte couldn’t help but act like an uncivilized child. It was no doubt because Alphonse was always making fun of her...

Bam!

Charlotte froze at the sound of something hitting the wall.

She looked up and found herself trapped between the wall and Alphonse. With her back pressed up against it, she had nowhere to go.

Charlotte was small, so she couldn’t see Alphonse’s face unless she tilted her head back a rather painful amount. She did so, and found Alphonse staring back down at her with a sharp glint in his eye. He let out a long sigh.

Fear raced through Charlotte as she locked eyes with him. He was close, and it had been many years since the last time she had been in such close proximity to a man’s loins. Shocked, she felt her legs give way.

“You say you’re not jealous, but here you are trying to make *me* jealous by calling for another guy instead. Your Royal Highness is a cruel one indeed.”

“Huh? Wha...?”

“Please stop it with these ‘enchanting tricks.’ I don’t want any more rivals than I already have.”

Charlotte couldn’t comprehend Alphonse’s surprisingly flirtatious tone. No—her brain couldn’t take it at all, which is why she could only scream: “S-S-Someone come help me! This pair of loins is going wild!”

Charlotte shouted these easily misconstrued words. Immediately, Alphonse came back to his senses. Charlotte slipped out from where he had her trapped and continued to shout with cupped hands.

“Save this fourteen-year-old princess from these horrible loins!”

“Hey! Stop, please! I’m sorry! I realize what I did was foolish!”

And so, the cries of this young girl and young man rang throughout the graceful, white-walled palace.

Extra Story 2: Beautiful Mrs. Greta's Bewitching Seminar

"Okay, is everybody here? All right then—class is in session!"

Greta looked around the classroom and clapped her hands together.

"Why did *I* have to come?" Cecily murmured in a quiet voice. She had been forced to join this seminar as a student.

"Come on, Cecily. Let's learn all we can from the madam," Charlotte—the one who'd roped Cecily into coming—said, from the seat beside her.

This whole "Greta's Bewitching Seminar" thing had been Charlotte's idea, and it had been organized with surprising haste. The Snowflower Palace had many empty rooms, and so this one had been transformed to look exactly like an academy classroom, and made ready for Greta's lesson.

From behind her red-framed glasses, Greta's eyes twinkled.

"Class has just started and you're already a talkative bunch. Might I need to discipline the pair of you?"

Greta struck the table with her teacher's baton like a whip as she licked her bewitching lips.

"S-Sorry, beautiful Mrs. Greta!"

Greta had spoken as if the class was full of students, but in truth, the only ones present were Charlotte, Cecily, and for some reason, Rolo.

Well, I suppose Maria and the other maids are here too...

Charlotte was still the Fifth Princess. The maids were on hand to make sure this "bewitching seminar" wouldn't have any negative influence on their princess.

While Cecily was looking back, Maria caught her eye and gave her a simple smile.

"Lady Cecily, don't mind us. Think of us as academy superintendents who

have come to check up on the class.”

“G-Got it...”

Academy superintendents? All thirty of you?

Greta gave a small cough.

“Now then, Miss Charlotte. Would you mind leading the morning salutation?”

“Of course! All rise! All—”

“Oh, no, no, no!”

Charlotte and Cecily had stood up for the morning salutation, but Greta was waggling her forefinger at them. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. Miss Charlotte, this is not an academy class—this is the bewitching seminar! I know that the usual morning salutation includes everyone rising, giving a greeting, then sitting down, but for this class, I want you to inject some sensuality into each act, please!”

“You do? B-But is that really possible, beautiful Mrs. Greta?”

“Of course it is. This salutation, when performed in front of the one you like, contains limitless possibilities!”

Cecily had already gotten a sense of foreboding when she’d heard the name of the seminar, but it seemed the class was going to be far more draining than even she had anticipated.

Greta stepped down from the teacher’s podium and came to the pair’s desks. Using Cecily’s chair, she showed them how it was done.

“First up is rising from our seats. It’s done like this... Oops!”

As Greta began to stand up, she lost her balance.

Oh no!

Standing right next to the desk, Cecily reached out to grab her mother. She supported Greta in both arms to catch her fall.

“M-Mom, are you okay?!”

“And by skillfully acting as if you were about to fall over, you can get the one you’ve set your sights on to lend you a hand. That is the correct way of doing

things," Greta said, before sticking her tongue out with a cheeky grin.

It was all an act!

Cecily had been tricked into helping! Frustration welled up within her.

"To score extra points, you should say, 'Yes, I'm quite all right,' while giving a demure smile as you look up at the man who's worrying about you."

"I see!" Charlotte said, evidently impressed. She started scribbling in her notebook.

Cecily gave her mother a derisive look, and Greta apologized before moving away from the desk.

"Thank you, Cecily. I'm so happy you caught me," Greta said. After this unexpectedly kind reply, she bowed her head. Faced with such a modest response, Cecily's anger fizzled out.

"R-Right... If you say so."

"Oh, you'll forgive me? What a kind soul you are."

As Greta raised her head, a lock of hair fell upon her right shoulder. Greta glanced down at it as she lithely brushed it back up over her ear.

"And this...is a bewitching way to greet someone, or to say thank you."

"Fascinating!" Charlotte said, with a little applause. Cecily, on the other hand, was aghast at having been used once again.

"Finally—sitting back down."

Greta then turned to face Cecily and Charlotte with a strange look in her eye. Terrified that her mother was about to say something unsuitable for Charlotte's ears, Cecily let out a panicked shout.

"Mom!"

"While class is in session, please call me beautiful Mrs. Greta!"

"B-Beautiful Mrs. Greta—you do realize Lady Charlotte is only fourteen, don't you? I don't think you should be teaching her any more strange things!"

Charlotte was Cecily's friend—her *best* friend. She couldn't simply sit in

silence while her mother fed her such unsavory information.

“Oh, Cecily, you’ve got things the wrong way round.”

Charlotte had spoken. She was waving her hand as if to suggest Cecily was being foolish.

“Th-The wrong way round?”

“Indeed. The books you love to read are picture books and fairy tales, are they not?”

Cecily hesitated, then nodded.

“I love them too, but every story ends with a single kiss between the lovers. Unlike you, I’ve read romance novels for adults—which are about three levels more grown-up than your stories.”

“Th-Three levels more grown-up?!”

“That’s why Maria and the others haven’t stepped in to halt the class. Surely that’s answer enough for you?”

Yes—despite appearances, Charlotte had deep knowledge of these things. Although she had no practical experience, the Fifth Princess’s knowledge far surpassed Cecily’s own!

“Hmm, well... I can see why Cecily’s concerned. I’ll leave the sitting down part for next time.”

“Aww...” Charlotte said with a pout. On the other hand, Cecily was relieved.

Greta returned to the teacher’s podium and started writing on the blackboard with white chalk.

With nothing else to do, Rolo clambered up Cecily’s back to perch upon her shoulder. His paws were on her shoulder to help him balance, but his claws stung a little. Cecily remembered she needed to trim them a little, or this would hurt more in the near future.



“Next up is this! Ta-dah! ‘Are you currently in love?’” Greta pointed at the board as she read out what she had written in huge letters. “By leveling up your bewitching power, you can ensnare any person of your choosing. However, when you wish to be enchanting, be aware that its true power comes in knowing who it is you’re trying to win over.” It was Charlotte to whom Greta was flashing a provocative smile. “We all know who Cecily likes. But Princess Charlotte, are you interested in anyone at the moment?”

“Every pair of loins is the same,” Charlotte said simply.

“Yes, but you seem to get along well with the Celestial Knight Brigade that guards you, don’t you?”

“No. Every pair of loins is the same,” Charlotte said again, unwavering.

“Ah! That boy with glasses. What about young Cyril, who possesses such hidden passion?”

“Mr. Cee Rill is an object of admiration, not desire. I don’t have romantic feelings for him.”

“Maybe you’ve mistaken love for admiration? That happens sometimes, you know.”

Charlotte’s expression grew uncomfortable. It spurred Cecily’s desire to protect her friend.

“Mom... I mean, beautiful Mrs. Greta, I think that Lady Charlotte does simply look up to Cyril.”

“All right, then. Let’s see... How about young Alphonse?”

Charlotte let out a strange sound.

“Alphwah?!”

As she stroked her rose-gold hair, she turned away with a huff.

“Alphonse’s loins are nothing more than a p-p-perverted playboy. He isn’t even worth considering.”

“Oh, is that really so?”

Greta was smiling broadly for some reason. Meanwhile, Cecily thought about

Charlotte and Alphonse.

What did Sir Alphonse do to Lady Charlotte, I wonder?

Charlotte was already horrendously wary around men, but she seemed to particularly dislike Alphonse. As Cecily wondered why, Charlotte's hand shot into the air, her panic clear to all.

"M-More importantly, beautiful Mrs. Greta, aren't there more practical techniques that you could teach us, apart from how to rise from a chair and how to thank people?"

"Let's see now... You see, I don't have such a variety of techniques as you might think." Greta placed a hand to her cheek and let out a weary sigh. "The thing is, when push comes to shove, one simple technique is all you really need."

"One technique?!" Charlotte and Cecily said in unison.

"Using this technique, I was able to bring an end to the 805 Years' War."

"Mom's just making stuff up," Cecily said, with a suspicious glance at her mother. Greta simply shrugged.

"Fine—I'll give you a demonstration. It'll be dangerous for you there, so come over here, Rolo."

Rolo meowed and obediently moved over to where Greta was—after all, he had been her cat to begin with.

"Now then—have a feast of my special technique!"

Up on the teacher's podium, Greta waved her red hair and clacked her heel on the floor. In the next moment...

"Bewitching Beam!"

...something happened.

Before Cecily's very eyes, a dazzling beam of light flashed out.

When she came to, she was lying at the back of the classroom in a pile with Charlotte. She looked around and noticed the maids had also collapsed on the floor.

Charlotte let out a groan—it seemed like she had come to, as well.

“I couldn’t see anything... I couldn’t see a single thing.”

No... You’re wrong, Lady Charlotte.

It wasn’t that she hadn’t seen anything. Both she and Cecily *had* seen it. However, the shock of the bewitching beauty that they had bore witness to was more dangerous than any poison. In order to protect them, their brains had erased their memories of it.

In other words, Cecily and everyone else were suffering from a very short-term form of amnesia. Their memories, now sealed away, would not return.

“What an incredible technique... I am overwhelmed, Mrs. Greta.”

“Wow, to think someone could remain standing after my Bewitching Beam. I shouldn’t expect any less of the Fifth Princess’s lady-in-waiting.”

“You flatter me.”

Amid the chaos, only Maria remained on her feet.

The shock her mind and body had received was too great—Cecily, and the others too, still could not stand. Greta smiled benevolently as she surveyed the scene.

“It seems both my students and their caretakers are exhausted, so how about we talk about makeup and beauty lotions next? Then we can talk about stretches that will help with swelling, as well as some health tips I use myself.”

The teaching that followed would have been better classed as a beauty seminar than a “bewitching” one. However, all the latest beauty tips that Greta’s teachings provided were taken to heart by everyone in the room. Eventually, these tips spread outside the Snowflower Palace to all the women in the kingdom, as well as the generations that would follow.

Extra Story 3: Lost in a Sweet Love

“Wow...! Incredible! Absolutely incredible!” Charlotte said, in high spirits.

Cecily and Charlotte were in a storehouse found in the Celestial Knight Brigade dormitory.

Cyril—an author who wrote under a pseudonym that allowed him to hide his gender and his true identity—had invited them over. This was Charlotte’s first time coming to the knights’ dormitory just to hang out, and she was accompanied by Cecily.

Cecily looked around the storehouse quizzically, but Charlotte was happily going about the room. Or rather, she was peering at the stacks of manuscripts on all the shelves there.

When Charlotte had been told that these books were all the manuscripts for Cyril’s romance novels, as a great fan of his, she could barely contain her excitement.

“Is Cyril... Uh, Mr. Cee Rill really so incredible?”

“Of course he is!” Charlotte said, nodding her head enthusiastically at Cecily’s curious question. “His novels have titles that inspire your curiosity, fleshed-out characters, a variety of exciting escapades, thrilling romantic drama... Every single novel by Mr. Cee Rill is packed with excitement to the brim!”

“Thank you,” said Cyril, who was with the pair. He scratched his head shyly after this passionate praise. When he smiled like that, this youngest member of the Celestial Knight Brigade truly did seem young.

Talk about an impressive output, though...

Cyril wrote in his free time outside of his duties in the brigade, but this was still an overwhelming number of manuscripts. How long had it taken to write this much? Cecily couldn’t even imagine how much time he’d put in.

“May I read some of them?” Charlotte asked.

“Be my guest.”

Cecily simply watched over from afar as Charlotte began to read, eyes glittering. However, before long, the princess called out to Cecily.

“Cecily, you come too. You’ve got to read it yourself!”

“O-Okay,” Cecily said, responding to Charlotte’s gesticulating.

“This is a manuscript for *The Princess’s Secret Love*, one of my favorites! Ohh, to think that I’d get to read the original manuscript for *Secret Love*—one of Mr. Cee Rill’s most famous works. If this was leaked, there would be chaos among his fan base!”

“R-Right...”

Cecily didn’t really understand why Charlotte was getting so excited, but she decided to flick through the book that Charlotte had handed over. However, she soon closed the manuscript with a snap.

“Th-Th-This is...extremely passionate!”

The pages told of a world of sweetness and passion that was far removed from what Cecily knew.

“Really? You think? Where?” Charlotte said, as she peered over at Cecily.

“C-Come on, Lady Charlotte. When the knight was kissing his lover, he used his t-tongue!”

“That’s pretty normal, Cecily.”

“It is?! B-But what about the bit where he undoes her dress as he talks to her?”

“Also pretty normal.”

“F-Fine—but what about this bit?! He pushes her down onto their b-bed! That does *not* seem like something an upstanding gentleman would—”

“Again, that’s normal, Cecily.”

Is it really...?

“Don’t worry, Cecily. When you start reading, you’ll see the appeal. I guarantee it.”

“No, I can’t. I can’t read such a shameless novel!”

Cecily’s eyes were spinning due to the contents of what she’d read. However, Charlotte fought her corner.

“Mr. Cee Rill’s novels aren’t popular just because they’re passionate! Their true beauty lies in his delicate depictions of his characters’ mental states! During the scenes that show the thoughts of the two lovers as they’re drawn to one another, my own heart starts beating super fast! They know that their love is forbidden, but the knight and the princess can’t hold back their love as they desire something more sordid than just a kiss! It’s so wonderful I just want to scream!”

This was all too intense for Cecily. The stories she loved so much were all cheerful fairy tales and children’s stories that always had happy endings.

With steam practically coming off the top of her head, Cecily felt herself tumble backwards. Someone caught her before she fell over.

Without the wherewithal to thank them immediately, Cecily turned around to see Zeke.

“You okay?”

“Yeah... Thanks.”

Cecily supposed he had come during break from work. She cozied up to him in relief. Still on cloud nine, Charlotte was chatting animatedly with Cyril, unaware that the captain had arrived.

“What made you start writing romance novels?”

“What made me start? Let’s see... I often borrowed my older sister’s novels to read. I think that had a big influence on me.” Apparently, Cyril and his sister were literature lovers. “Tales of romance that occur in a world that’s so distant from our own—these fictitious stories that are like dreams, fantasies, or miracles... Just thinking about them gets me excited.”

Had something happened to Cyril in the past? Cecily was concerned for a moment that something unfortunate had befallen him, but to her surprise, he seemed truly happy as he spoke about romance.

Charlotte was nodding her head in understanding as she looked intensely at Cyril.

“Mr. Cee Rill... This is just a proposition, but if you like, I would like to sponsor you and your future career.”

“R-Really?!”

“Of course. One of the duties of the royal family is to protect exceptional artistic talent and to preserve it for future generations.”

Cecily had never seen Charlotte as serious as she was now.

“Also, there’s some stories I’m interested in. If you wouldn’t mind, could I take a few of these manuscripts home with me? I promise I won’t lose them or get them dirty.”

“Of course. I’d be overjoyed to hear your thoughts.”

“If my thoughts would be even a little helpful, I’d be more than happy to!” Charlotte said, completely fired up.

“Then how about we hash out an agreement?”

“Let’s!”

Still engaged in conversation, the pair trotted out of the storehouse, talking all the while.

As she watched them go, Cecily came to her senses and jumped away from Zeke. She had just realized now they were alone together in this empty room.

“T-Talk about a lot of manuscripts! I couldn’t believe Cyril wrote all of these.”

“You said it. Not only that, each one is really well written. They’re enjoyable to read no matter your gender.”

“I see...”

Zeke had been reading Cyril’s work since before he’d made his debut, and had been the one to cordon off this storehouse for Cyril’s manuscripts. You could have said that he was Cyril’s number one fan.

Cyril said that Zeke has been influenced by his novels.

Zeke had once been a simple man who didn't have a way with words, but thanks to reading Cyril's work, he had managed to reciprocate Cecily's love in his own way. Cecily valued not just the actions that came from his caring nature, but also the sweet words he spoke to her.

However, judging from what she had read earlier, Cyril's works contained many scenes of passionate love. Kisses were given just by the grace of someone's lips being free. Clothes were worn for the purpose of being taken off. It was completely normal to push one's lover down onto the bed. If all of this was normal, as Charlotte had said, then Zeke was a gentleman among gentlemen.

This had been true of Zeke when Cecily had spent some time alone with him after his post-mission bath the other day. They had both sat upon the bed, and although a soft atmosphere had settled over the two, Zeke hadn't done anything that had made Cecily uncomfortable.

Zeke truly is kind...

Cecily's chest filled with a warm happiness as she confirmed to herself that Zeke really did treat her well.

Noticing that Cecily was lost in her thoughts, Zeke asked, "What's up?"

"N-Nothing. I'm fine."

Cecily was far too shy to tell Zeke what she was thinking, so she simply flashed him a smile, deflecting his question.

"Hey, Zeke?" she spoke again. "Which of these particularly moved you? If you have a recommendation, then I'd like to read it."

"Hmm... I think we might have different tastes," Zeke said cautiously. He reached down towards a shelf which was at waist height. "Let's see... Here. This one was good."

"Which one?"

Cecily peered over, then froze. The title was something else.

Please Kiss Me! The Witch Who Craved a Kiss from a Cool Knight.

Cecily stifled the cry of surprise that was about to come out of her mouth.

This seems... This seems awfully similar to our situation! ...No, no, I'm reading too much into it!

Cecily looked at Zeke's face, but he didn't seem to have any ill will. He had simply responded honestly to Cecily's question and picked out one of his favorites.

All the same... I might actually want to read this one.

"I see. What's it about?" Cecily asked, playing it cool. Zeke responded quickly.

"It's a story about a witch who's a bit obsessed with romance. She busies herself trying to find a way to get a cool knight she likes to kiss her."

"I-Is that right? S-Sounds interesting."

Cecily couldn't help but smile. Although it seemed like the characters were different from her and Zeke, she couldn't help but see her own love story in the novel. All the same, it was a bit embarrassing to think about it that way.

"Well, he hasn't actually started writing this one yet, actually."

"Huh?"

Zeke flicked through the pages. Each one was blank.

As she looked closer at the title, she noticed that "*Please Kiss Me!*" was written in different handwriting from the other books. This wasn't one of Cyril's manuscripts.

Which meant that Zeke had prepared this fake book himself.

"Zeke, you lia—"

Cecily's tirade was cut off. A pair of warm lips had covered her own.

Zeke dropped the empty manuscript and drew Cecily towards him. It was a kiss that contained passion enough to swallow Cecily whole.

In her nervousness, Cecily closed her lips. Noticing this, Zeke opened an eye and kissed Cecily's lips and mouth from all angles.

After a few seconds of this, Zeke drew away, seemingly unhappy that he had to do so.

“Sorry for lying to you, Cecily.”

Cecily’s breath wasn’t even ragged—she felt oxygen deprived. Zeke saw Cecily’s slight swaying and hung his head in shame.

“I’m sorry. You’re just so pretty, so beautiful. I couldn’t help myself. I intended to take things slowly, but...”

It seemed that Zeke wasn’t the height of gentlemanliness that Cecily had imagined.

However, he was holding himself back now for her sake. He was forcing himself to take things slowly so that his passion for her wouldn’t hurt her. As she realized this, Cecily felt warm.

Oh... You’re so kind.

Zeke was about to step back to give Cecily some space, but she drew him in without even asking. He looked at her in surprise.

Blushing, she asked of him: “...A-Again.”

“Huh?”

“But this time, can we... Can we go a bit more slowly?”

This was all the innocent Cecily could request of Zeke.

“Of course, my princess.”

The knight smiled in response to the witch’s sweet request.

And their kiss was sweeter and warmer than in any story.

Afterword

Hello, and nice to meet you. My name is Harunadon.

Thank you ever so much for reading *Accidentally in Love: The Witch, the Knight, and the Love Potion Slipup*. The title's rather long, so you can refer to it as *Accidentally in Love.*

The novel was originally serialized online. Afterwards, I made a lot of edits regarding the plot and the characters' backgrounds, resulting in the work you have before you.

I'm grateful for being able to publish so many novels—however, of all of them, this one required a particularly tight schedule. It felt like my soul was quite literally leaving my body due to this indescribably difficult schedule, and I actually lost consciousness at my desk a number of times. Please don't follow my bad example, kids.

In the novel, the story is about Cecily (the witch) who makes Zeke (the knight) drink a love potion.

We have an image of these potions that can control people's hearts being used by wicked people in stories, both then and now. In shojo manga, too, the rival of the heroine uses these kinds of potions to cause a rift between the heroine and her friends.

This novel's protagonist, Cecily, may be a witch, but she is also a sensitive, introverted, and shy girl. Nothing would make me happier than for my readers to relate to Cecily as they enjoy the novel.

Cecily's true cuteness only really emerges as she meets the other characters in the novel and gets to know them, so it's only natural that Zeke's love for her will accelerate, no? I think it could accelerate even faster than this.

I'd like to say some words of thanks before I finish.

Thank you to my editor, F, who continues to work with me despite currently working at another publisher. I'm really happy that we got to work together again on this novel.

Thank you to my illustrator, Eda. There were many times that I wanted to give up, but thanks to seeing Eda's cover art for the novel, I was able to keep going. Thank you for your wonderful drawing of the cool and manly Zeke and the sweet, smiling Cecily.

Finally, I'd like to thank you for reading this book. I hope to meet you again in another novel soon.