
Accidentally in Love:
The Witch, the Knight, and the Love Potion Slipup
2
Harunadon
[ILLUSTRATION]
Eda


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Prologue: A Promise for the Future

On the outskirts of the witch village was a small flower field.

When she was a little girl, Cecily often enjoyed playing there, and would carefully pick the beautiful flowers in bloom. She liked putting them in a vase by the window, or making flower crowns to give to her father, mother, or her cat, Rolo.

On this day in particular, it was incredibly windy. Petals of all colors and dandelion seeds were caught by the breeze and danced in the air.

In this stunning, dreamlike scene, Cecily was clasping a flower crown in her small hands as a young boy who was standing nearby began to speak.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said.

"Leaving? Where are you going?"

A puzzled look came over Cecily's face as she turned to look at the boy. She wondered where this outing would be taking him, but saw that his face was scrunched up in a grimace of pain.

"I'm going far away. With my family."

"How far?"

"But," he said quickly, trying to reassure Cecily, who had fallen silent after her brief reply, "I'll come back."

"Right..." Cecily said, drawing her lips tight as she held her emotions in check.

If he was going far away, then there was no chance of him coming back soon. He was the only one in the village close to Cecily's age, so this news made her a little upset. Cecily was about to tell him this, but as she looked at him, she noticed that he wore a pained expression.

Of course...

He was the one leaving, so it was obvious that he would be far more upset about his departure than Cecily was. *If so, then I need*

to send him off with a smile, Cecily thought. She held the flower crown out to him.

"This is for you!"

"Huh?"

His voice contained a trace of confusion, but Cecily paid this no heed, and placed the crown onto his head. She looked at him, her one-of-a-kind crown of white flowers on his head.

"Yeah! Just as I thought—it suits you. You look super cute."

"'Cute'?"

The boy's face flushed with embarrassment, but this just made Cecily giggle more.

The pouting boy placed his hands on Cecily's shoulders. He wasn't clasping them with any strength, just allowing the weight of the hands of a boy his age to rest upon her. Cecily stopped smiling as she asked, "What's up?"

"Um... I want you to promise me something."

"A promise?"

Even as she said these words, Cecily found herself nodding with slight embarrassment. She couldn't take her eyes off him—she couldn't look away from his eyes, that were more beautiful than any flower or fruit...

"Cecy, when I come back as a grown-up, then I..."





“Mmf...”

Cecily let out a stifled groan as she was dragged into the waking world. Rolo had smacked her cheek with his front paw. This was his usual wake-up call for breakfast. The greedy black cat wouldn’t hesitate to use slightly violent methods to rouse Cecily, who wasn’t much of a morning person.

“Jeez, Rolo. Can’t you wake me up a bit more gently?”

Rolo merely meowed in reply. He slunk off the bed and began licking his belly without a care in the world. It was evident that he had no intention of listening to Cecily’s request.

Cecily shook her head in exasperation before pulling a big stretch in bed.

A yawn escaped Cecily’s lips as she thought back on the fading memories of her dream.

“That dream really takes me back...”

It had been almost ten years since that day, but Cecily hadn’t seen the boy since then. She wondered what he was doing now. Was he well? Her mother would probably have filled her in if she’d asked, but all the same...

Cecily’s memories from back then had grown foggy and vague, and she couldn’t remember his face anymore. But one thing that remained steadfast in her memory, even now, were those beautiful eyes of his, which had almost seemed to glow.

“Of course... He had red eyes too.”

As Cecily’s sleepy brain began to ponder the meaning of that, she remembered something, and it was pushed completely out of her mind.

“I completely forgot! Zeke invited me over to his home today!”

Cecily tumbled out of bed in a rush, and before long, the eyes of her childhood friend vanished from her thoughts completely.

Chapter 1: The Witch in Love Wants to Get Married

Soft flaxen hair which curled at the tips. Large red eyes that trembled with anxiety. Dressed in her favorite pinafore dress, Cecily bowed her head as she stood in the large doorway to Zeke's home.

"M-M-My name is C-Cecily Ramps. I may be of low station, but I am in a relationship with your son, Sir Zeke."

Cecily was stiff and awkward, but the Stein family warmly welcomed her into their home.

"Come on in, Cecily."

"I've always wanted a daughter. To think that I'd be blessed with one as lovely as yourself at my age!"

The pair welcomed her with warm smiles and kind words as they took Cecily's hands in theirs—first, Zeke's father, Baron Stein, and then Zeke's mother, Baroness Stein.

It looked like both of them were from, or had roots in, the south. Their olive skin tone was like Zeke's, but in terms of looks, he was more like his mother—their fierce hazel eyes and proud noses were one and the same.

"Honey, don't get too ahead of yourself by calling her your daughter. Look—it's making her feel awkward!"

"Oh, yes, I know. I'm just so surprised that Zeke has finally brought a girl home."

As for Zeke's two older brothers, they were moved to tears. They didn't look much like the handsome Zeke, but their pleasant faces were exactly like their father's.

Zeke, standing next to Cecily, was finding it difficult to get a word in. Cecily found this adorable. As she grinned at him, Zeke brought his face closer to hers.

"What's got you smiling, Cecily? Whisper in my ear and tell me

what it is."

"Oh! N-No, it's nothing. I'm not thinking anything strange, or anything..."

Zeke grinned back at the flustered Cecily.

Zeke's family all stared at one another and began to chatter as this wave of sweetness reached their ears.

"Did I hear that properly?"

"Alphonse did tell us that Zeke makes this lovey-dovey face when he looks at Cecily, but I honestly can't believe my eyes..."

"Has Zeke been possessed?"

"Typical. None of you understand—a man in love is a completely different beast!"

Zeke's family were all whispering to one another, but snippets of their conversation reached Cecily's ears.

Th-This is so embarrassing...

As Cecily wobbled with intense embarrassment, Zeke put his hand on her dainty shoulder.

"Cecily gets embarrassed easily, so could you leave the teasing there?"

Under his glare, Zeke's mother let out a chuckle and clapped her hands together.

"Very well—let's have some lunch, shall we? I've whipped up my best dishes."

"You cooked *yourself*, Mrs. Stein?"

"Of course. I've loved cooking ever since I was little. The dishes are southern recipes from my hometown—I hope they're to your taste."

Cecily's eyes glittered with excitement. She cleared her throat and pulled herself together before making a suggestion.

"I'm really excited. I-If you don't mind, is there anything I can help with?"

"Are you sure? I'd love your help!"

True to her words, Zeke's mother happily grabbed Cecily's arm and led her into their home.

This is where Zeke used to live.

Zeke had told Cecily that his family had only recently attained

baron status, but their home, which was already fancy from the outside, was filled with the finest decorations. Even Cecily, who knew little of such things, could see that the furnishings and paintings were exquisite.

The dining room was cozy, which meant that everyone was seated close together around the table. Whereas most nobles adhered to formalities, she could tell that the Stein family valued the time that they spent together.

Cecily thought back to what Zeke had told her only a few days ago.

Zeke said that we'd be having lunch together, so I should just come as I usually am. I see what he meant by that now.

He had probably said this to help Cecily relax before she had to meet his family, but it seemed like he'd meant it at face value too.

This was Cecily's first time in this home, but she already felt comfortable. The peaceful lunch that began shortly was an enjoyable experience even as a guest.

The lunch was a veritable feast, containing a number of dishes Cecily had never seen before. The southern dishes which made heavy use of spices and fruits had rich flavors—they were delicious, and Cecily couldn't help but take seconds.

Zeke's mother was at the heart of the conversation. Zeke was generally quiet, but when his mother gave him a poke, he would say a few words in reply.

The Steins were a merchant family who chiefly dealt with spun wool. Zeke's brothers helped with the business, and said with smiles on their faces that they wanted to increase their trade with the help of their proprietors.

Cecily was immediately taken not only with Zeke's parents, but with his brothers too. Zeke had told Cecily that his two brothers were close, but it was evident in how they looked at Zeke that they also adored their little brother.

I'm so glad Zeke invited me.

When Zeke had asked if she'd like to visit his family home the other day, Cecily had almost fainted there and then due to the emotional weight of it all. Cecily was an introvert, and so she'd

hesitated at first, but her desire to meet Zeke's family had won out in the end.

In what sort of home, and surrounded by what sort of people, had Zeke grown up? Her desire to know this led her to muster up her courage and nod to say that she'd like to come. And now she was here, witnessing many sides of Zeke that she'd never seen before—awkward expressions, troubled expressions, expressions of frustration... Cecily couldn't help but feel inwardly excited at seeing him wearing the kinds of faces that one only shows their family.

And so, as the six of them enjoyed a harmonious conversation over after-dinner tea, Zeke's father spoke up. "Mind if I ask a question?"

But what came next was totally unexpected.

"When are the two of you getting married, then?"

It was truly fortunate that Cecily didn't spit out any of her tea, but Zeke's two brothers spat out theirs in perfect unison.

M-M-Marriage?!

They had only just started dating—surely this was far too soon. Cecily was already filled with joy and excitement just being Zeke's girlfriend; it was far too early for marriage.

Cecily's cheeks grew redder and redder as these thoughts raced around her mind. However, Zeke's reaction was different. From the chair next to hers, he spoke with a serious expression.

"I'd like to get married as soon as possible."

"Huh?"

Cecily couldn't help but leap to her feet. She hadn't realized Zeke felt this way. Leaning on the table, Zeke looked at her expression of wide-eyed shock.

"I thought it might surprise you, Cecily, so I kept quiet about it."

Which meant that Zeke had wanted to get married since ages ago. There was an unmistakable fire in his hazel eyes.

"Cecily, I want to be with you every day of my life. When I wake up, your face is the first thing I want to see. I want to kiss you good morning. These are the thoughts that go around my head every single day."

"Oh, Zeke..."

Cecily had dreamed about this herself.

Only a month ago, she had left the Snowflower Palace because she knew she couldn't stay there forever. Now, she was back in her little cabin in the woods near the royal capital.

Once every three days, she would head to the palace or to the wyverns' stables. It wasn't always guaranteed that she would see Zeke. He was the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade, after all, so he couldn't always spend his time with Cecily. It was a bit lonely, but Cecily was proud of him and his important role in protecting the country. All the same, if they got married and lived together under the same roof—these dreams would become a reality.

"B-But there's, uh, a lot of things that we'd need to prepare..."

Zeke didn't take his gaze off the stuttering Cecily. He was looking at her so intently that it seemed like he was trying not to blink—his intense stare remained fixed upon her.

"If you're worried about preparations for our wedding, then don't. I'll properly deal with them all."

Then let's get married!

Or so Cecily's heart wanted her to say. After all, she wanted to marry him too. A part of her was in a rush to hear him say his vows before he changed his mind. When faced with the actual prospect of it, however, she regained a level head.

"Zeke, before we get married...I need you to meet my dad."

Cecily's mother, Greta, had already taken a shine to Zeke. She was sure she wouldn't say a word against them getting married. The problem, therefore, was her father.

"Yes, of course. It's true—I do need to greet your parents."

Zeke nodded in understanding, but Cecily was still uneasy. She swallowed as she steeled her resolve.

"But, listen, Zeke. I can only warn you, but my dad is suuuper overprotective. I think you'll find it hard to convince him to agree."

Telling Zeke this will probably only bother him.

However, Cecily knew she couldn't hide something important from Zeke. She didn't want to lie or trick him. As unease filled her chest, Zeke took Cecily's hand and laid a kiss upon it. His hazel eyes were full of a fierce resolve.

"I'm going to tell him that I intend to take the daughter he worked hard to raise as my bride. I'm ready to receive any punches or whatever else may come my way."

"Oh, Zeke..."

"Now that we've settled that, I need to take time off somehow so I can meet him."

Cecily's heart skipped a beat. Meanwhile, Zeke's family watched the scene with grins on their faces.

"You're not even married yet, but you're both so passionate," Zeke's mother said.

"That they are. It reminds me of us, in our younger days. Although I won't let them beat me!" Zeke's father replied.

"Oh, darling, stop that!"

"I need to talk to my fiancée with this much passion!" the middle brother chimed in. To which Zeke's oldest brother replied:

"I'd advise you not to, little brother of mine..."

Cecily and Zeke paid the family no heed, and remained in their own little world.

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And so, Cecily decided to travel back to her hometown with Zeke, her first boyfriend. However, one big problem stood in their way—and that was the rule of witch society.

When a witch turns fifteen, she must spend two years journeying the world. This was one of the absolute rules of witch society.

But I've not done any traveling...

Cecily, who didn't know her right from her left, had cried as she'd left her home and ended up in a small hut near the royal capital, where she had spent an uneventful year. She had hardly gone anywhere else.

However, that wasn't the issue—the problem was that she was still sixteen. Even if she could hide the fact that she hadn't seen any of the world, she couldn't lie about her age. Was it really okay for her to return home? Would she be ousted as soon as someone in the village saw her face? She was terribly worried.

When there's something you don't know, ask someone who might!

With this thought in mind, Cecily headed back to the Snowflower Palace, where her mother was still staying.

The redheaded witch, who was enjoying an elegant teatime in the garden, was as youthful and beautiful as ever today. Her long eyelashes, which curled gracefully, delicately decorated her eyes.

Greta happily greeted her daughter, who had suddenly arrived.

"What a surprise, Cecily! Everything okay? Why not have a cookie?"

As soon as Cecily sat down in the seat that was offered to her, she got right to the heart of the matter.

"Mom, I want to marry Zeke!"

"Do you now? Sounds good to me."

As expected, Greta gave her approval easily. Well, maybe a *bit* more easily than she'd expected.

"Zeke is a dashing young man. Well done on winning over a gentleman as gallant as him. He reminds me of my darling when he was younger."

"He does?"

"Yes, although my darling is still as dashing as ever!"

"Right..."

Greta was happily laughing to herself, but Cecily wasn't sure how to take her mother's words. Yes, Zeke was dashing, but she felt weird hearing Greta say Zeke was like Cecily's father. Cecily's father was cute in the way that mascots are cute—he was the farthest thing from your typical handsome gentleman. However, Cecily knew it wouldn't be polite to argue the matter, so she brought the conversation back on track.

"I need dad to give his blessing, so I have to go back to our witch village. Oh—only for a few days, though. Zeke can't get too much time off from his duties."

Cecily's explanation was full of excuses, but Greta nodded as if this was no big deal.

"Yes, why not? I don't see the problem."

"Are you sure?"

Cecily was taken aback by how casual her mother's reply was. But Greta went on.

"I mean, you're only returning temporarily, right? There's no one keeping watch every second of every day. If you pretend it's been two years, then I think most people will take your word for it."

Greta had seen through Cecily's worry without her needing to explain a thing. All the same, her anxiety wouldn't dissipate so easily.

"You think?"

"I do."

Cecily tried her best to practice a light expression that said, *Hey, I can't believe it's been two years!*

Greta took a sip of tea, then let out a bewitching sigh.

"I don't think my darling will agree to the marriage that easily, though."

"Me neither..."

Cecily's shoulders slumped in dismay. Greta pushed a cookie into Cecily's upset lips.

"You need to smile at times like these, Cecily. It's a request from his darling daughter! I'm sure even your father won't treat it with complete disdain."

"Mom, can you help me convince him?"

Cecily's father agreed to most things her mother asked for with a beaming smile.

"This is something you and Zeke need to accomplish on your own, no?"

Yes—she was right. Cecily could think of nothing to say to that, and so munched on the cookie. It was delicious. The Snowflower Palace's pâtissiers were all top-class.

"Cecily, I'll be leaving the Snowflower Palace soon."

"Really? Why?"

Greta chuckled. "A good woman is flighty and prone to boredom. Well, my love for my darling doesn't waver, though." She winked at her daughter, but Cecily didn't take her mother at her word.

"Don't you mean *you're* flighty and prone to boredom?"

"Insolent children get the pinchy punishment!" Greta said, as she

pinched Cecily's cheeks.

"Waaah! Stop it!" Cecily screamed.

"Cecily's...going home...?"

From the shadows, a lone girl watched the scene, but Cecily, with tears in her eyes as she ran away, didn't notice her at all.

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Things progressed quickly after that.

It was fortunate that there were few reports of rampant magical beasts in any areas recently, and that the Celestial Knight Brigade wasn't forced to go out on any missions.

Zeke's request for a vacation was accepted. In fact, the higher-ups even told Zeke that this was a good opportunity for him to get some well-earned rest—everyone knew that Zeke worked even on holidays.

It all seemed to be progressing well. However, on the day of their departure, a problem occurred.

"Please, cheer up, will you?"

The target of Zeke's pleading was a creature with white, boulder-like skin—Zeke's partner, a wyvern called Snow.

"Snow! Are you listening?"

However, Snow gave no indication that she was. She merely looked away, those intelligent blue eyes making it evident that she was in a bad mood. Her refusal to look at the pleading Zeke reminded Cecily of a petulant child.

Cecily and Rolo watched the pair of them from outside the stables. The wyverns that the Celestial Knight Brigade rode were usually peaceful, but possessed a hidden violent side. For their own safety, it was forbidden for outsiders to enter the stables.

"Zeke, is she not willing to be left alone?" Cecily said in a small voice. However, Zeke shook his head weakly. He turned around to talk to her.

"I'm sorry, Cecily. It'll take a little while longer to convince her."

Zeke seemed genuinely sorry, but he didn't have a clue what to do to fix Snow's bad mood.

Usually, there was no better partner on a long-distance trip than a wyvern. Snow could clear a distance that would take three days by carriage in a single trip. However, it was forbidden to use wyverns for personal reasons. Zeke currently had no missions as the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade, and would merely be flying with Cecily to her hometown—if he asked Snow to take them just for the sake of saving time, he would receive a far harsher punishment than simply having to write an apologetic report to the higher-ups.

Due to this, it was decided that they would get Snow to stay on her own in the stables, but she wasn't remotely interested. In fact, she seemed more and more against the idea every time Zeke had lowered his head and asked her over the past few days.

Wyverns were smart creatures, and only warmed up to the person that took care of them. If Snow didn't agree to be left alone, then it would be dangerous to leave her in the hands of the other knights while Zeke was away.

It would be the worst thing if one of the knights got injured while we were away.

Cecily shook her head to rid herself of the thought. She had made Zeke let her come today in order to fix the situation.

"Zeke, would it be okay if I spoke to Snow?"

"Really?" However, Zeke readily agreed with a small nod. "If you could, please. But it's dangerous, so don't get any closer than this."

"Of course."

Cecily nodded to Zeke before slowly coming out from behind the stable door. Snow, who had been refusing to look at Zeke, tilted her entire head towards Cecily. Cecily's red eyes locked with Snow's blue ones.

It was a witch who tamed the wyverns long ago. I'm a witch too.

Wyverns were once vicious magical beasts that were impossible to tame. However, that had all changed thanks to the power of witches. Cecily didn't know what she must have done, but an ancient witch had transformed wyverns into creatures that could be tamed by human hands. As for Snow herself, she had once gone on a rampage in the past before Cecily's call had stopped her.

Cecily wasn't sure how well it would go, but she was ready to try,

just as she had back then.

Although it was scary being grabbed in Snow's jaws that time...

Even remembering that day caused her head to twinge with pain.

She hadn't asked Snow to carry her up into the sky in her mouth that day, so in all honesty, she wasn't confident about this time. However, she had to try.

"Hello, Snow. It's been a while. How have you been?"

Cecily tried to keep her voice as gentle as possible. Snow slowly blinked in response—almost as if she were returning Cecily's greeting.

"Listen, Zeke has taken time off to see my dad. We're going to go see him so that we can receive his blessing to get married."

Cecily spoke softly, as if she were speaking to a dear friend.

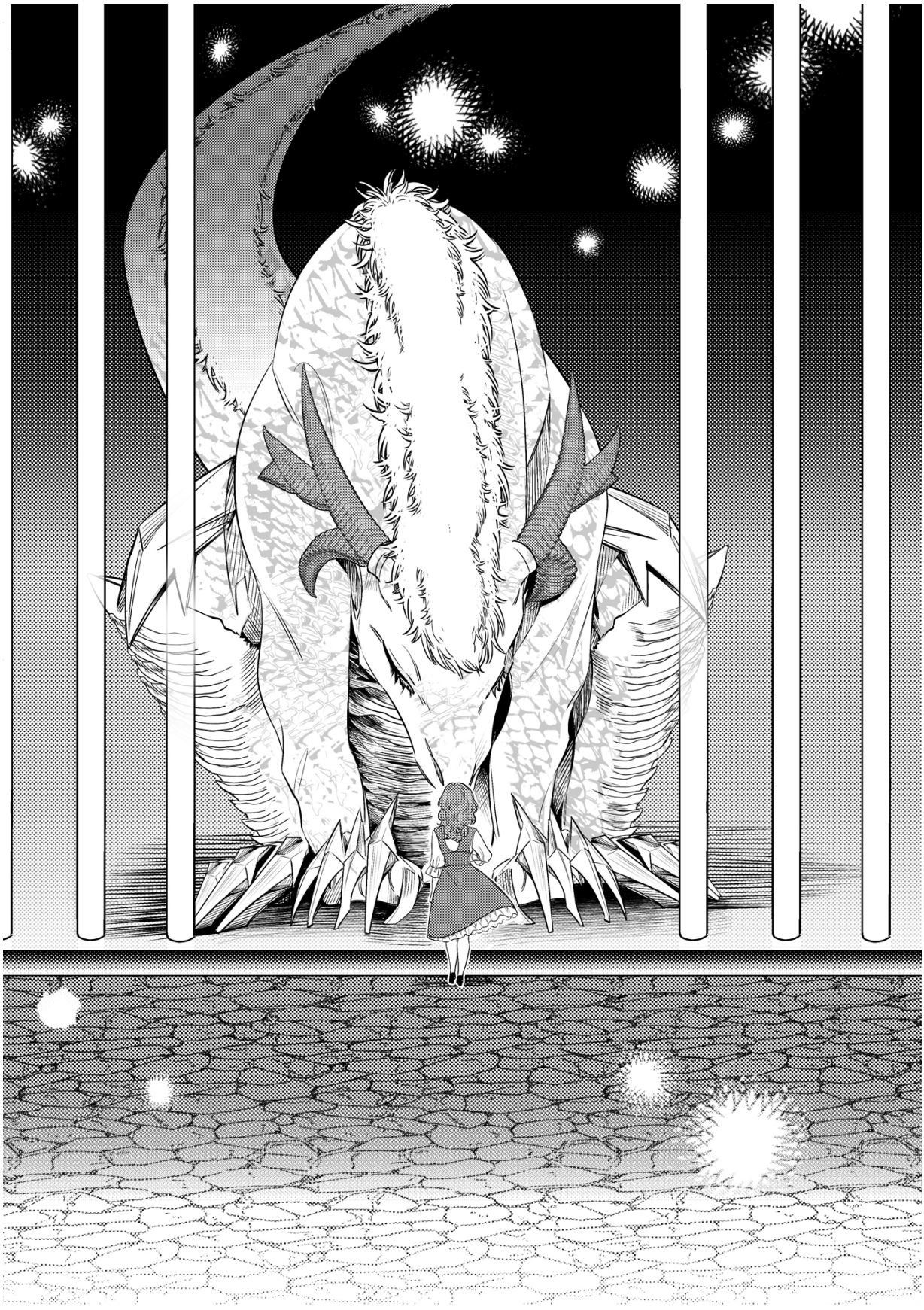
Snow might have been a girl, but she wasn't a rival for Zeke's romantic affection. That wasn't because Snow was a wyvern, but because she was Zeke's trusted partner. Cecily and Snow weren't enemies, but Zeke's allies who could coexist. Snow was Zeke's fangs, his shield, his wings—and she was important to Cecily as well.

"So please, Snow. It won't be long, but please let me have Zeke to myself for just a little bit. Is that okay?"

At first, Snow was silent in the face of Cecily's request. However, before long, she raised her giant body. Cecily looked up at the ceiling and watched Snow's large throat move as she let out a gurgle.

Zeke's eyes widened in surprise, and Cecily beamed at Snow.

"Thank you for understanding, Snow!"



Snow let out another quiet gurgle.

"So she listens to Cecily, huh...?" Zeke murmured, looking troubled.

Oh, Zeke. It's just Snow's unfathomable maiden's heart.

Cecily smiled to herself. Zeke and Snow were an irreplaceable pair, so that was probably why his wyvern sulked or got angry from time to time—it was because Snow felt comfortable enough around Zeke to express her emotions.

More importantly, Snow had been successfully convinced to accept Zeke's departure. Zeke approached Cecily, who was still smiling.

"Thank you, Cecily. You saved the day."

"It's nothing. I'm just happy I got to talk to Snow again."

Zeke flashed Cecily a smile before calling out to Cyril and the other knights outside the stables.

"Sorry, all. I leave Snow in your hands."

"Leave her to us, Captain!"

Zeke then gave a thorough explanation to Cyril and the rest.

Despite the difficulties so far, it seemed that they would be departing after all. Cecily put her hand to her chest in relief.

A few hours later, it was time for Cecily and Zeke to leave.

"I'm fully aware of the situation at hand. I'll be accompanying you, Cecily!"

"W-Wait a second—Lady Charlotte?!"

The young woman who'd suddenly appeared was none other than Charlotte, the Fifth Princess of the Carzenia Kingdom.

Ever since her best friend and her teacher had left the palace one after the other, she had been low on energy. But today, she was full of life.

Her wavy rose-gold hair was tied into two bunches. Her emerald-green eyes glittered like jewels, and her rosy cheeks were flushed with excitement.

Maybe it was specifically tailored for outings, but the princess was wearing a comfortable dress that looked easy to move in. She was full of vigor and as sweet-looking as ever.

Then, Charlotte clicked her fingers. It must have been a sign, for two carriages pulled by two horses each came trotting down the stone pavement towards them. Charlotte puffed out her chest in pride at Cecily and Zeke's surprise.

"I asked my father, and he got the finest craftspeople with the best skills to specially make these super special carriages. They're not as fast as wyverns, but they're super quick, and traveling in them won't hurt your bums during the journey! They have little windows to adjust the temperature inside, to make them the perfect warmth at all times. Not only that, they're made so that they can't be opened from the outside, so they're safe against bandits and villains. Despite that, the outside is designed to look like a normal merchant's carriage, reducing the chance of anyone targeting it!"

"Th-That's quite something..."

Cecily was quite overwhelmed by Charlotte's rapid and unrelenting explanation.

The king was soft on his daughter, so Charlotte had evidently managed to get him to spend money on something quite incredible.

"Which is why, basically... I'd like to join you on your journey home."

Cecily and Zeke looked at one another as the fifth princess stared up with her beautiful eyes. Charlotte had prepared these special carriages, and had even explained what was great about them. She truly did want to join them.

"I'd be more than happy to have you with us, Lady Charlotte."

Cecily was excited to go on her first journey with Zeke, but it would be fun having Charlotte there too. However, there was a problem.

One knight isn't enough to ensure Lady Charlotte's safety.

Not only this, the one in charge of guarding Charlotte was the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade himself, Zeke, who was currently on vacation for the purpose of making this journey to Cecily's home. This was a personal matter, during which he would meet Cecily's father.

It was a difficult ask to get the other knights to come along, and even if they did, their entourage would be quite a sight.

I think it would be hard for knights to even enter my witch village.

There were many people who wished to use witches' potions for evil purposes. Witches in the current era usually lived out of sight of regular people. Having said that, ever since Cecily was a child, many people in Cecily's village had brought their friends and lovers into the village. Witches had limited choices in terms of marital partners, so this wasn't unexpected. But a long time ago, there was a witch who invited someone with wicked intentions into the village. Of course, this witch had taken responsibility for her actions, and had given him a hiding as well as a potion to erase a portion of his memories. However, because of this, to this day the location of the village remained a secret.

For this particular journey, Cecily was sure no one would be angry if she brought Zeke and Charlotte, whom she trusted, to the village. However, taking multiple knights there was a different story.

Perhaps Charlotte had sensed all of Cecily's worries, for she huffed loudly through her nose before speaking.

"Don't worry. Alphonse's loins will be guarding me."

"You heard her. Leave the princess to me, you two," Alphonse said.

"Sir Alphonse, you're coming too?"

"I'll add that Maria will be taking care of my personal requirements," Charlotte said. Maria, who was standing behind the princess, bowed her head deeply. Charlotte couldn't even dress herself, so having her lady-in-waiting was a requirement. At any rate, Cecily felt safer with the reliable Maria with them.

"So that's that. There are no problems now, right? I won't cause any trouble. Although you can't send me back now, anyway—I've decided I'm coming."

It seemed that Charlotte knew there was a possibility of being turned down. She stared bravely up at Cecily and Zeke, but her swimming, puppylike eyes had no force behind them.

Zeke glanced at Cecily. She returned his look with a smile and a nod. She was hesitant, but she knew that Charlotte's request wasn't a huge burden on them.

“Of course you won’t be any trouble, Princess,” Zeke said. He fell to one knee and looked up at Charlotte.

Charlotte pouted, as if to ask what he was doing. In gentle tones, Zeke spoke to the adorable princess.

“However, there will be dangers outside the castle. In such an event, you must follow my or Alphonse’s instructions. I only ask you to promise me that.”

“F-Fine. I promise.”

Zeke smiled as Charlotte fiercely nodded her agreement.

“In that case, Cecily has agreed, and I see no reason to say no either.”

“Really? Thank goodness...”

Charlotte’s relief lightened her expression. She excitedly hugged Cecily.

“Okay, we have two carriages—one for men and one for women!”

“Huh?”

Alphonse muttered something in response to Charlotte’s statement. Cecily couldn’t hear his words, but it was evident that he was unable to comprehend what Charlotte was thinking.

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After these various delays, the group set off for Cecily’s witch village, with Cecily, Charlotte, and Maria riding in the first carriage, and Zeke, Alphonse, and Rolo in the second.

This division of passengers had worked nicely. Alphonse had initially been unhappy with it, but it was an order from Charlotte, so he couldn’t really complain.

All the same, Cecily was surprised at how seriously Alphonse was taking his guard duties. She was certain his dismay was at the fact that dividing them up between the carriages in this way would decrease the amount of protection Charlotte had.

But Lady Charlotte does hate all men, after all.

Due to her brothers’ loving but overprotective attitudes, Charlotte had internalized the idea that men were all terrifying creatures. This had led to her developing an intense fear of and aversion to them.

From Cecily's point of view, it seemed that Charlotte's condition had improved as of late, if only a little. However, it would have been far too much to expect Charlotte to spend an extended period of time with Zeke and Alphonse in an enclosed space. In fact, Cecily found it strange that Charlotte asked to travel together in the first place.

The men Charlotte usually saw were members of the Celestial Knight Brigade. However, if she were to leave the palace, then she would inevitably encounter more than double the number of men she normally dealt with on a daily basis.

Cecily and Charlotte sat facing one another in the carriage. With a look of confusion on her face, Charlotte spoke.

"Everything okay, Cecily? Your bum doesn't hurt?"

"Everything's fine. It might be a bit too luxurious, even."

"Isn't it just!"

Carriages usually led to sore behinds and an uncomfortable sense of claustrophobia. Some people got sick just from traveling in one. But this one was different. Even when it traveled across unpaved track, it barely shook. The inside of the carriage must have been soundproofed, because you could barely hear the wheels turning outside. The seats were soft and bore their weights well, so there was no need for extra cushions. This carriage was full of alterations that would make a long journey bearable. If it went on the market, every noble would want to get their hands on one.

"It feels, I don't know... A little too fast, maybe."

The view outside passed by in a blur. Yes—the carriage was far too fast. She had indicated the general direction of her village, but at this point Cecily was somewhat anxious that they might go speeding right past it.

"We've got the most macho of horses pulling us along, so of course it's fast."

Yeah, they were *pretty buff horses.*

The horses were the most muscular ones Cecily had ever seen. Charlotte had gone on about not wanting to be attacked by bandits, but unless the bandits' own horses were sprinting, they would have had a hard time catching up. And even if they *did*, these macho

horses could simply use their snouts to swat the bandits away.

At this rate, we'll be home by tomorrow morning.

Zeke had taken seven days off. They had planned for six days of round-trip travel, and had thus only intended to stay in the village a short while, but at this rate they would be in the village for five whole days. Cecily remained overwhelmed by the carriages, but she was grateful to Charlotte.

"By the way, Lady Charlotte. Why did you ask to come with me?"

The carriages had left the royal capital, and the horses were now galloping through the forest. In response to Cecily's question, Charlotte pursed her lips.

"So I *am* just trouble for you, then."

"Not at all. It's just that there are many men outside the palace. I was wondering why you'd force yourself to come."

In fact, you would find men living on practically every street. Should you be somewhere with women in the world outside the palace, then surely, at least one of those most hated men wouldn't be too far away. It was the same with all animals—if you spotted a female dog, then it was highly likely a male one was sniffing around nearby. Basically, once they were out of the castle, it would be impossible to avoid encountering men.

Cecily was sure Charlotte was aware of this, but she was still worried. Charlotte merely turned her head down and answered Cecily's question in a whisper.

"After all, it's..." Charlotte murmured, but the rest of what she said was too quiet to hear.

"What did you say?" Cecily said.

In the next moment, Charlotte's face turned beet red. She screamed her next words.

"A-After all, it's the place where my best friend was born and raised—of course I'd want to visit at least once!"

The feelings behind Charlotte's words seeped into Cecily's heart like spring water. Cecily put her hand to her chest as she said, "Lady Charlotte, that's the loveliest thing I've heard."

"That it is," said Maria, who was next to Cecily.

"Quiet, both of you! Don't you tease me too," Charlotte said,

before letting out a huff and turning to face the carriage window. She probably wanted to hide her blushing face, but she wasn't aware that her ears were bright red too.

Just then, she let out a gasp and pointed out the window.

"Cecily! Cecily! What *is* that?" she said, excitedly calling for her friend.

Cecily herself peered out the window, but the carriage had passed the object by in no time at all.

"That's a waterwheel, Lady Charlotte," Cecily said.

"Oh, yes, I know. They're used to draw water from the river, to be used in irrigation ditches for the fields! And what's that?"

"That's an old farmer."

"Incredible... I never thought I'd get to see an old farmer's loins."

Charlotte excitedly pushed her face closer to the window, practically glued to the view outside.

"This won't do! The carriage is so fast that I can't see him anymore!"

The gentle autumn breeze tickled Charlotte's dimpled cheek.

I almost forgot. Charlotte's a princess—she's never seen anything like this before.

Listening to Charlotte call every man she met a "pair of loins" with an absolute abundance of energy, Cecily could almost forget that she was a princess of the Carzenia Kingdom. Raised without any firsthand knowledge of the outside world, everything outside her palace was sure to pique her interest. Cecily was sure that Charlotte wasn't lying when she said that she wanted to visit Cecily's hometown, but she thought that Charlotte probably also wanted to see the towns and villages where her countrypeople lived.

The anxiety Cecily was feeling about her first trip back home gradually lessened as she watched Charlotte display her excitement about their journey. A gentle smile found its way to Cecily's lips.

"This is fun, isn't it, Lady Charlotte?"

"That it is! I know—we can go on an all-girls trip next time. We can invite Mrs. Greta too!"

Cecily chuckled. "Let's do that."

As they chatted merrily together, Cecily pulled something out of

her bag. It was still a while until their planned rest stop, and so she began working her hands while continuing to enjoy her conversation with Charlotte and Maria.

"Is that the embroidery you were working on before, Cecily?"

"Yes, it is. Please continue to keep it a secret from Zeke," Cecily said, placing her forefinger to her lips.

"Of course," Charlotte said, hurrying her own hands to her mouth and nodding her understanding.

Cecily had intended to finish it after arriving in the witch village, but since Zeke was now riding in a separate carriage, she could work on it without having to worry about him finding out. Thanks to the smooth journeying of the carriage, she could work without the concern that her hands would be jolted around.

"I'm sure the captain's loins will be overjoyed to receive it."

"You think? Don't you think he'll find it silly?" Cecily said. She couldn't help but keep worrying about it.

"Of course he won't! He'll be jumping for joy with a big smile plastered on his face," Charlotte said, with a snickering laugh herself. However, Cecily simply stroked her embroidery frame with some lingering anxiety.

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Around the same time, in the other carriage, a heavy mood had settled over the two men and their male feline companion.

"'This will be fun,' she said... What's fun about two men and a cat cooped up together?" Alphonse said.

Rolo meowed in agreement.

"It's a picture of absolute misery."

Rolo meowed yet again, sulking on his seat. It was clear to Zeke that Rolo was in agreement with Alphonse. However, Zeke himself couldn't bring himself to agree with either of them.

"You think?" he said. "I don't mind at all." Clearly, he held the opposite opinion.

"Seriously? Didn't you want to have a romantic little trip with Cecy, where you could get some private flirting time?"

However, Zeke was completely oblivious to Alphonse's teasing.

"But Al, we get almost no chances to hang out and relax like this. It's a rare occasion, so I'm happy."

Zeke and Alphonse had originally been like oil and water when they had both first joined the Celestial Knight Brigade, but now they were stalwart allies who could trust each other with their lives in battle. Getting to relax and chat without any worries, away from work, was a valuable opportunity that didn't come along often.

These words that Zeke spoke with no trace of embarrassment made tears well up in Alphonse's eyes. He was both flattered and embarrassed.

"You're cruel for being able to say that with a straight face, Captain."

Rolo let out a meow. He had started rolling about on the soft seat, now evidently enjoying himself.

"Plus, Cecily's been on her fair share of carriages by now with no issues. I'm not worried in the slightest."

"Oof—a direct blow of Zeke boasting about his girlfriend!" After a pause, Alphonse went on. "That reminds me—you invited Cecy round to your parents' place, didn't you? That means she's been officially welcomed by them."

"Yeah, but I need to get Cecily's father to welcome and accept me."

"Don't sweat it! It'll be fine, so stop stressing," Alphonse said, patting Zeke's tense shoulder.

Zeke realized then that Alphonse had been aware of how nervous he was feeling the whole time. He gave a small smile and nodded. "Yeah." Then, changing the topic, he continued, "How did Princess Charlotte manage to convince His Majesty to let her leave?"

Until they had appeared earlier that day, Zeke hadn't any idea that Charlotte and Alphonse wanted to join them on their trip.

The king and the princes loved Charlotte an almost unhealthy amount. They would not so easily give their permission for Charlotte to leave the palace without her entourage of guards. All the same, the fact of the matter was that Charlotte was now in their traveling party. Zeke didn't know how it had come to be.

"'I'll call you daddy.'"

"What the hell's come over you?" Zeke cut Alphonse off, a chill running down his spine.

Alphonse simply shrugged as he continued. "'I'll call you daddy if you let me go, so please,' is what Princess Charlotte said to His Majesty. It practically forced his hand."

"Oh, I see," Zeke said, as the pieces finally fell into place. This would certainly have had an immediate effect on the king. In recent years, it was shockingly rare that Charlotte would see her father and brothers. Getting to hear his daughter, who suffered from an extreme phobia of men, call him "daddy"—yes, the king would surely have had no route left to him but to acquiesce to her demands.

"Apparently, the destructive shock of her calling him 'daddy' led to His Majesty having to take to bed. It'd be bad news if other nations caught wind of the fact that he's bedridden, even now."

A wave of fear passed over Zeke as he thought of the incredible power their princess wielded.

"Fathers, huh..." Zeke said thoughtfully. Just what kind of person was Cecily's father? Greta was such a free soul that Zeke couldn't help but imagine Cecily's father as being similar, but from what Cecily had said, it seemed like this image was far from reality.

Zeke leaned on the windowsill and let out a pensive sigh.

Alphonse was right—there was no point in him worrying about things now. Zeke knew this, but as he remembered Cecily's worried descriptions of her overprotective father, he couldn't stop his thoughts from racing.

Chapter 2: Your Daddy Will Not Allow It!

The carriage journey proceeded without any major issues, and in the evening, the group stopped off at a post town, in which travelers were able to stay overnight, where they enjoyed the spring baths and tasted some of the local cuisine. Charlotte got overexcited about every single thing she was seeing for the first time and ended up going to bed with a fever, but luckily she had recovered by the next morning.

And so, the group's journey entered its second day since they'd left the royal capital.

At some point in the early afternoon, they alighted from their carriages and were now walking up a low mountainside, far from any nearby settlements. As the carriages wouldn't be able to traverse this terrain, they had left them and the drivers at a village at the foot of the mountain. There was a wooden path underfoot for the first part of the journey, but after about an hour, they entered a completely unpaved path. The unlevel ground was difficult even to walk on, and exhaustion came upon them quickly.

"We're almost there!" Cecily called out to the group behind her.

Charlotte had insisted on walking by herself, but she had run out of energy a little while back. Maria, now carrying the princess's limp body piggyback, was as cool as a cucumber, keeping pace with Zeke and Alphonse on either side of her. As for Zeke and Alphonse, they had changed into the refined blue uniforms of the Celestial Knight Brigade before beginning the climb.

Zeke really was serious about wanting to greet dad while appropriately dressed.

However, she agreed with his decision. Why? Simply because of the fact that he looked absolutely dashing in uniform.

Although the Celestial Knight Brigade were known to all in the royal capital, Cecily doubted that anyone in her village would recognize their distinctive uniforms. Luckily, this meant that no one would jump to the conclusion that they had come at the behest of the king.

After a number of small breaks to refill their canteens and eat a light lunch, Cecily finally came to a stop. The place to which she had led them was a huge cliff face deep in the mountains, where only hunters would dare go. Charlotte had woken up by the time they arrived.

"We're here."

"Huh? We are?" Alphonse said. He wiped the sweat from his brow and glanced around. "But Cecy... There's nothing here."

"Wait behind me for just a second," Cecily said, making sure the group was a short distance from her.

She placed her hands upon the cold, mossy rock and took in a deep breath, filling her lungs with the mountain air. It felt as if her whole body was being cleansed. With this feeling in her heart, she chanted: "Open."

A barrier had been put in place long ago by a powerful witch to conceal the village entrance and keep away outsiders. As she poured her magic into the rock face, Cecily imagined a hole forming in it.

As soon as she took a step back, a crunching sound came from the rock.

"It's a bit dangerous, so stay back, everyone!"

A crack suddenly ran down the rock face. The rock was so solid that it seemed like it hadn't moved in many millennia. However, fissures now spread across its surface as it began to disappear right before their eyes.

Finally, a tunnel that looked man-made appeared before them, with no dust, debris, or pebbles to show that the rock face had ever been there to begin with. Apart from Cecily, everyone was speechless.

"Now *that's* something," Alphonse said, after a pause. He and Maria were in utter disbelief. However, Zeke was deep in thought, with his hand on his chin.

"It looked like a normal rock face... But it's evident that it was merely an illusion."

Zeke had a keen eye. Whereas the others had been convinced that the rock face had transformed, the truth was that it had never existed in the first place. The tunnel had been there all along, yet magic had made the brains and eyes of those who looked at it unable to perceive what was truly there.

"The witch village needs to remain hidden from people, you see. Ours is disguised behind a rock face, but other villages are disguised beneath the water, within great fields of ice, in heavenly flower fields, or upon protrusions hanging from sheer precipices. Or at least, so I've heard, as I've not actually been to the other villages."

"Beneath the water or in heavenly flower fields... Wow, I'd like to see them. Although I'd rather avoid the one by the edge of a precipice..." Charlotte said. Having just witnessed such incredible magic, she found that her exhaustion had vanished in an instant.

"Okay, let's head in. We're almost there," Cecily said as she walked on. Rolo dashed ahead of Cecily to lead the way, perhaps sensing that he was back in a place from which he had been absent for so long. At the end of the tunnel was Cecily's hometown. Cecily's feet were exhausted, but now that she was so close to the finish line, she found the energy to make the final stretch.

At last...the witch village.

There were other villages across the land with this name, but Cecily's was a particularly small settlement. There were only approximately fifty witches and their families, and this number had been falling over the years. Sometimes people left for other villages or went on journeys of their own, often because they wanted to find love and start their own families.

With its own fields and livestock, life in the witch village wasn't altogether that different from how it was in a normal village. Naturally, the villagers took care of the fields and livestock by themselves. What set it apart from regular villages were the workshops attached to each house. The witches who lived there would sometimes go and sell the potions they had concocted to nearby villages and towns to earn money for vegetables, seeds for

crops, and more livestock.

As they followed the winding path into the village, roofs came into view in the distance. The village seemed to glitter in Cecily's eyes as the sunlight shone down upon it.

"This wasn't what I was expecting," Alphonse said, his wide eyes taking in the bucolic scene.

"Really?"

Alphonse scratched his cheek awkwardly.

"Well, I don't mean to offend you, Cecy, but I imagined a witch village to be more...I dunno, sinister-looking. Like gloomy skies, crows cawing in dead trees, creepy black houses with lizards crawling on them... That kinda thing."

"Yeah, me too. But it's the complete opposite!"

Cecily couldn't help but chuckle at Alphonse and Charlotte's honesty.

"Yeah, our witch village looks like any old village, really. I mean, people do like black and red things, and we have a few slightly odd traditions, but we're all just living here like anyone else."

Soon they had arrived at the entrance of the village, and Cecily began to wave as she called out, "Hey, everyone!"

A group of witches engaged in discussion at the well near the entrance glanced over with slight bewilderment. They had tensed up at the arrival of outsiders, but then surprise flickered across their faces as they realized who it was.

"It's Cecily!" a child with a stick in her hand called out. Soon enough, the rest of the village had come rushing out to the entrance.

"Well, I'll be—if it isn't little Cecily!"

"Who'd have thought you'd come back before *he* did?"

"I didn't think you'd be back so soon!"

"'So soon'? But it's already been two years!" Cecily said, having decided to try and pull the wool over their eyes.

"What are you on about, dear? It's only been a year!"

Busted!

However, Cecily didn't mind that they had seen through her lie. It was still her first time home in a year—their reunion was joyful.

Cecily reached out to hug her fellow villagers...

"I'm ho—"

...but they all went rushing past her. The ladies of the village quickly formed a circle around Zeke and Alphonse.

"My, my, would you look at that! Who are these dashing gentlemen?"

"Take a look at his broad chest! Now *that's* a real man!"

"He's so tall! He has black hair! He looks kind of scary! Ohh, how wonderful! Can I give you a hug?"

Alphonse, who was also a handsome young man, was receiving his fair share of attention, but it was Zeke that drew most of the eyes there. The women of the village had gathered around him like butterflies around a flower.

As for Zeke, he was blinking in complete disbelief. It was clear to Cecily that this situation was overwhelming him, but he greeted the group properly, as the polite captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade ought to.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. I am Cecily's boyfriend. My name is Zeke Stein."

"Zeeekey!" the group said in unison. An excited cheer rang through the crowd, almost stifling his last words. Cecily had never seen these women, most of whom were close to her mother's age, squeal like young girls before.

"Even your name is dashing. A perfect gentleman."

"I can't believe you snatched up such a hunk out there! You go, Cecily!"

"I know, Zekey—why not give a new woman a try? Pick me!"

"You can come back to mine. I'll keep it a secret from my husband...how about it?"

"Whoa, whoa, hold it!" Cecily said angrily. She wanted to stop everyone from flirting with Zeke left, right, and center, and puffed up with anger as she batted away the kisses that were blown Zeke's way from all directions. "Stop touching Zeke without permission! His broad chest and chiseled abs belong to me!"

Cecily was so stressed out that she began spouting embarrassing things that she would never have had the courage to say normally.

Watching his lover with caring eyes, Zeke spoke up in a loud voice that cut across the crowd.

"I'm sorry, ladies. I have devoted my whole life to Cecily alone."

The whole crowd went silent with surprise.

"And I must tell you that every inch of my body belongs to Cecily."

Squeals of excitement worked their way through the crowd as Zeke said these words with a hand on his chest and a smile upon his face. Some even fainted on the spot.

Cecily bumped her way through the crowd of witches who had managed to avoid fainting.

"He really is head over heels for you, Cecily."

"It pains me to say this, but I've no chance of swaying his mind. My best wishes to you."

Cecily flushed with embarrassment at the comments her acquaintances made as she made her way to Zeke.

"Cut that out already!" Cecily said, but the other witches merely cackled with amusement at the youngsters they enjoyed teasing.

A little distance away, the children of the village were crowding around Maria. They were excited by the sight of Charlotte, who was still being held by Maria.

"Wow, you're so pretty and your hair's so fluffy. You look like a princess!"

"You're so beautiful! You're like a dolly!"

Charlotte was bright red at all this attention.

"Well, yes, I am a pr—" she began to say, but then bit her tongue. While on this journey, they had to hide Charlotte's name and status. It was far too dangerous for anyone to find out she was a princess.

"A pr...?"

"A pr...oud young noblewoman. My name is Lottie. This is my maid, Maria. The captain's loins and Alphonse's loins are my loyal knights. And Cecily is my friend!"

"Huh? Loyns...?" The girls all gave Charlotte looks of confusion.

"Nice to meetcha all! Keep Lady Lottie here company, okay?" Alphonse said with a wave, now that he was free from the twittering

women. Some of the girls by Maria found themselves flushing at his gentle smile, their earlier confusion disappearing.

"You're kinda cool, Alphonse," one of the girls said.

"You think? Aha ha, well, thank ya!" Alphonse said, still smiling.

But Charlotte found herself pouting.

"Playing with a little girl's heart like that... You really are the worst."

"What's wrong, Lady Ch— Lady Lottie? Jealous, perhaps?"

"Jealous?! Not in a million yea—"

However, Charlotte's tirade was interrupted by a frantic yell.

"Cecilyyyyy!"

A man's voice rang across the gathered crowd. Everyone turned to the source of the noise, and their eyes fell upon a short, portly middle-aged man dressed in an off-white suit. He had flaxen hair and black eyes, and his chubby features made him seem younger than he truly was. Sweat was streaming down his forehead and cheeks as he wheezed at the edge of the crowd.

"Dad!" Cecily called out.

"My little Cecily!"

No one dared to interrupt this reunion of father and daughter, and they parted the crowd with smiles on their faces. Cecily's father, Sewell, dashed with heavy steps through the gap in the crowd at top speed. He embraced his daughter, drawing the petite Cecily into his large body.

"You came home! Ohh, welcome back. You must've had it hard, being all alone!"

"It's okay, dad. I had Rolo with me."

"Of course, of course," Sewell said, nodding. He sniffled, trying to stop his nose running from all of his overflowing emotions.

"Please, use this if you'd like," Zeke said, presenting a handkerchief to Sewell, as natural as can be.

Zeke's kindness is as wonderful as ever!

Cecily's heart was sent aflutter, but Sewell hesitated. His nose was dry again.

"And...who might you be?"

"My name is Zeke."

Charlotte and the rest of the group introduced themselves in turn. Sewell nodded politely to each of them, but his gaze kept returning to Zeke. Perhaps his paternal instincts had cottoned on to Zeke's identity already.

"Um, listen, dad..."

Cecily wasn't sure what to say next. Meanwhile, Sewell let out an awkward cough.

"If you have something you wish to tell me, let's head home and do so there. I imagine everyone's tired, after all. I'll prepare tea."

Maria smiled apologetically at Sewell.

"Thank you for concern; however, it appears that Lady Lottie is rather taken with the village. I would be grateful if you would allow her to wander around and learn more about this place."

Sewell gave a big nod of affirmation.

"Yes, please do so. Although we are a simple run-of-the-mill village. Could I get a helping hand to show them around?"

"Me, me, me!" came a chorus of voices from amongst Alphonse's fans.

"I wanna play with Lottie!" came a cry from the children.

As the crowd chattered among themselves, Charlotte leaned up and whispered into Cecily's ear.

"Call for me if anything happens, okay?"

"Of course, Lady Char— Lottie."

"Not 'Charlottie'—just Lottie!"

"Yes, Lady Lottie!"

"Good. Okay, I'll see you later, then," Charlotte said, as she headed off with Maria and Alphonse. Soon the only ones left were Cecily, Zeke, and Sewell.

This is it.

Cecily's reason for coming home wasn't to see her acquaintances. Her and Zeke's number one reason for coming back was to get Sewell's blessing for their relationship so that they could begin preparations for their wedding.

I want to marry Zeke!

However, things weren't as simple as Cecily's strong desire to get married. She had been content with just being with Zeke, but when

she had seen the women tittering over him, this had reaffirmed something in her mind: Zeke was gallant—with his slicked-back black hair, his sharp hazel eyes, his tall nose, his thin lips, his muscular body, and his tall figure. Yes, he was undeniably handsome. Zeke himself might not have been aware of it, but he was popular with women whether he liked it or not.

Not only that, but although he seemed emotionally distant, he was gentle and kind, always willing to look out for others. The gap between his appearance and his behavior made him even more charming—he truly was the perfect guy.

It was true that there were only a few in the royal capital who understood his charms—but, like Nora, they did exist. If Cecily let her guard down, Zeke could be stolen away by a home-wrecker just like that.

If we get married, then that will mean fewer women showing such blatant interest in him...

"What's up, Cecily? You look pretty deep in thought," Zeke asked as they were walking to her home. He had immediately noticed the fire burning in her eyes.

"Listen, Zeke. I want to do this—I really do!"

Zeke wasn't aware that Cecily's desire came from a sense of urgency and anxiety, but he smiled happily to see her being so proactive about their marriage.

"Me too. Let's get your father to accept our relationship!"

"Yeah!"

The pair spoke in whispers as they secretly held hands while following Sewell. They had no idea that in that moment, Sewell's cheeks were pulled down in a frown.

I hope he gives us his blessing...

Cecily was Sewell and Greta's only child. Not only that, they had wanted a child for so long before they had managed to conceive her. That was the reason Sewell was so overprotective of his daughter.

One year ago, when Cecily was forced out of the witch village due to their unbreakable rule, she'd been ordered to travel the world for two years. Sewell had been against the whole thing right until the last moment, and had even shed tears, begging that he be allowed

to join Cecily. His reaction had been so extreme that Greta, exasperated, had slipped him a sleeping potion so that Cecily could actually leave.

Cecily had always kindly accepted her father's love. After all, she loved how caring he was. It was exactly because she cared about her father so much that she wanted him to accept her relationship with Zeke.

Cecily's home was a lot smaller than Zeke's. It was a cute wooden building and had a garden with an arch in which some autumn flowers were gently swaying in the breeze. Hanging upon the front door was a dried flower wreath that Cecily had made in her childhood.

Zeke whispered to Cecily, "In the future, I want to live with you in a home like this, so full of love."

"Oh, Zeke!"

The pair were unaware of the sound of Sewell grinding his teeth in anger.

"Now then...let's head to the reception room, shall we?" Sewell said, his words faltering. He guided them inside.

The house was barely different from how it had been a year ago. Enveloped in a strangely nostalgic feeling, Cecily walked down the corridor.

In the reception room, she sat side by side with Zeke on the sofa. She used to sit like this with her father, and it felt natural to sit like this with Zeke now.

Sewell's breathing became ragged, and with shoulders trembling he sat alone on a separate sofa.

"Dad, I have something I want to talk to you about."

Sewell listened in silence, hanging his head. Cecily noticed that his clenched fists were shaking slightly. She was a bit concerned, but couldn't allow herself to be distracted by it.

"Please, dad. Would you listen to what we have to say?"

Sewell remained silent. Cecily was about to speak again, but Zeke gently laid his hand upon hers. Perhaps he realized he was in front of Cecily's father, for he removed it quickly. Maybe this was a way of showing Sewell his restraint.

Zeke?

Cecily looked at him, and he nodded back as if to say, *Leave this to me.*

"Father, I am dating your daughter, Cecily."

Zeke had cut straight to the point. It was very like him. He placed both hands upon his thighs and lowered his head in a deep bow.

"Please, I beg of you to give your blessing to allow me to marry your daughter."

"Y-Y-You have no right to call me 'father'!"

Bam!

Sewell smacked his fist upon the table and let out a little yelp of pain as he did so.

"J-Just who do you think you are? I noticed what you were doing behind my back—holding Cecily's hand, whispering sweet nothings into her ear!"

He realized?!

Cecily's cheeks flushed hot. She had enjoyed the thrill of doing that in secret, but it was terribly embarrassing to realize that Sewell had been aware of it the whole time. She knew that she and Zeke were at fault here. She stood up to help Zeke.

"Dad, please don't be like that. I want to marry Zeke! I really do!"

"C-Cecily..."

Sewell couldn't believe what his daughter was saying. Soon his eyes, opened wide in shock, started to fill with tears. His cheeks grew wet as the tears streamed down them.

"Please, Cecily! Don't get married! Stay with your daddy! We can have fun together, just like we used to! Please don't leave me!"

"D-Dad, please keep it together in front of Zeke! It's embarrassing!"

"I might be an embarrassment to you, Cecily, but I love you so much!"

"I didn't say you were an embarrassment, dad..."

However, Sewell had lost all sense of composure.

"I don't care what either of you say—I'm never gonna allow it! Cecily's gonna stay with me! She's never ever getting married, no siree!"

"D-Dad..."

And so, this middle-aged man who had a child of his own began to whine like a petulant child himself. As tears streamed down his cheeks and snot dribbled from his nose, he merely repeated, "No, no, no!"

It would be impossible to get through to him in this state. Cecily turned to Zeke with a look of concern. His reaction was more extreme than she had anticipated, but his disapproval wasn't completely unexpected. Sending Zeke a message with a look, Cecily turned back to Sewell.

"I'm sorry for surprising you like this, dad. Zeke and I are going to step outside for some air."

We need to take a little break and try this again.

However, Sewell shook his head in frustration at Cecily's suggestion.

"Why? This is your house too, Cecily! Why do you have to go outside with that stupid boy?! I'm not gonna let you elope with him!"

"D-Dad, it's okay! We're not eloping—we'll be right back."

"Waaaah!"

Inconsolable, Sewell grabbed at Cecily's dress. Evidently unable to take any more, Zeke stood up.

"Cecily, I'll give you two some alone time."

"Zeke, but..."

"It's fine. You've got a lot to talk about, right? Why don't you and Mr. Sewell catch up and enjoy each other's company?"

There was no trace of anger in Zeke's expression. Rather, he seemed to be considerate of Cecily's wailing father.

Cecily pursed her lips in self-restraint and nodded. Zeke smiled and left the reception room.

I just want dad to know how kind Zeke is.

However, she knew she couldn't rush things. As her father sobbed, Cecily patted his hefty shoulder. He looked up at her with tears in his eyes.

"Cecily, do you hate me?"

"Of course not. I love you."

Cecily gave her father a quick peck on the cheek, and Sewell's

eyes showed that he had regained some composure.

I need to focus on calming dad down first.

Rushing would only make things worse. If Sewell started panicking and became obstinate, then he would be less willing to hear what they had to say—their entire reason for coming would be lost.

"Mom loves you too, doesn't she?"

"Oh, Greta... Greta, my beloved..."

A little more life came back into Sewell's eyes at the sound of his wife's name.

"That's right—she dashed out saying that she wanted to see you, didn't she...? Did you manage to meet her?"

"I did. Although she went off somewhere again a few days ago."

The day after Cecily and Greta's discussion of her marriage, Greta had left the Snowflower Palace without telling anyone where she was going.

"She also said she had to deal with a request... But, never mind, she'll be back before long. Ahh, I can't wait to live together again."

A request?

Cecily was intrigued, but didn't pursue the matter. She pulled her father up by the hand and got him to sit next to her on the sofa. Sewell took up about three-quarters of the sofa, but there was enough space for her to squeeze in beside him.

"I've got so much to tell you about, dad. Will you listen to my story?"

"Of course! What's happened over the past year?"

Sewell squeezed her hand, and Cecily began to tell him about the past year. About being ousted from the village, about living in a forest near the royal capital, about her life with Rolo... When she mentioned Charlotte and Alphonse, Sewell beamed, saying, "You've found some wonderful friends out there."

However, Cecily made sure not to mention Zeke's name. She wanted to, but she knew that she couldn't risk shocking her father. It made the past year seem far more dull than it had been, but Sewell listened, nodding with interest.

A few hours later...

It's evening already.

Cecily headed out into the garden, where the flowers were dyed in the setting sun. According to Cecily's original plan, Zeke and Sewell would have been clashing mugs of beer together in celebration about now, with their arms over each other's shoulders. Unfortunately, things didn't always go to plan.

Sewell was inside preparing dinner. Greta was awful at any and all household chores, so the house was kept up by Sewell. He had suggested that they enjoy a dinner, just the two of them, and Cecily couldn't refuse. If she had invited Zeke to sit at the dinner table with them, she was certain her father would lose his composure once again.

"I can't give up just yet. I've still got tomorrow and the day after too!"

Cecily clenched both fists in a show of resolve. Thanks to the speedy journey here, they had a lot more time in the village. There was still plenty of time to bring Sewell around.

In the next moment, Cecily heard the crunching of gravel from the road behind the garden. Looking up, she saw Zeke.

"You there, Cecily?"

"Zeke!"

As Cecily appeared, Zeke's expression lightened in relief.

"I thought I heard your voice, so I came this way. I was with Al and the others learning about the village. They showed us where they grow their herbs and where they concoct their potions. It was really fascinating."

Cecily listened in silence.

"As for tonight, we'll be staying at Marjorika's house. I'll be sleeping in the room in the corner, on the right."

"I see. Marjorika's house, huh...?"

Marjorika was an old woman in the village who was over one hundred years of age. She was kind to all, and a hugely central figure in the witch village. Marjorika always got news about the inhabitants of the village before anyone else, and so she had perhaps made this offer to Zeke, knowing that Sewell hadn't

accepted him.

"So don't worry about me, Cecily."

Cecily smiled weakly as she looked at her lover.

"I'm sorry, Zeke."

"Hmm? Why are you apologizing?"

Zeke was truly kind to act as if this were nothing. However, Cecily couldn't do the same.

"Because I didn't realize dad would reject you that strongly. You came all this way and into my home... I'm so sorry."

Cecily bowed her head in apology. Zeke had found time in his busy life to come all this way. If she were in Zeke's position, she would have felt anger towards this father who wouldn't accept him.

I heard that some couples break up because they can't get their parents to accept and understand them.

The more Cecily dwelled on their situation, the more fear welled up within her.

Zeke placed a reassuring hand upon Cecily's quivering head.

"Cecily, you don't need to think that."

"But..."

"The reason why father...Mr. Sewell is so against our marriage is because he loves you and is worried about you. Right?"

Cecily's voice caught in her throat.

"I'm the one who should apologize. I was the one who couldn't control myself and chose to hold your hand. I was the one who brought up marriage right from the beginning, without considering how your father would feel. I hope I can apologize to him."

Cecily looked up at Zeke, who was in thought.

I love this about you too.

Zeke was honest and sincere, almost to a fault. And, at times, clumsy. Even with the effects of the honesty potion no longer active, Zeke often told Cecily his thoughts honestly and plainly. No matter how embarrassing it might be, he faced everything head-on. Cecily loved this about Zeke so much.

"But you and your father are alike, huh?"

"Eh?"

"You have the same kind eyes, the same nose, the same sweet

face shape... You really do look alike."

Cecily could tell Zeke wasn't joking. Even though her father had been so rude to him, here he was, without a trace of anger.

"Zeke, you really are too kind."

Cecily glared up at him, but Zeke merely grinned cheekily.

"That expression doesn't suit you, Cecily."

"You're so stupid."

Cecily leaned into Zeke's chest and let him hold her and stroke her hair.

"Not only that, he just can't stand another man taking away his beloved daughter. I can kind of see where he's coming from."

"Really?" Cecily looked up at Zeke, who nodded with a smile.

"If we had a little girl one day who looked just like you, and her lover came by asking to get married, then...well, I wouldn't be able to simply say yes like that. I might want to sock that person, you know!"

"Y-You're getting ahead of yourself," Cecily said.

"You're bright red."

"That's your fault, Zeke."

What was he talking about—bringing up a daughter before they were even married?

But Cecily let herself imagine what it would be like—imagined an older but more refined Zeke lifting up a little girl who looked like both of them. It was wonderful, even in her mind's eye. Cecily whispered, as if dreaming.

"I'd want a girl, yes, but I'd also want a boy who looks just like you, Zeke."

"Cecily..." Zeke said, with some discomfort. He leaned down and whispered in Cecily's ear, "Are you trying to bewitch me?"

"N-No, of course not." She had merely said what she was thinking.

"Well, it sounded like it to me."

Cecily felt butterflies in her stomach as she listened to his sweet voice in her ear. He stroked her head and played with her earlobe with his fingers, as if checking what its shape was. It felt nice, but was ticklish. The atmosphere grew more intimate.

“You’re so cute, Cecily.”

“St-Stop that, Zeke.”

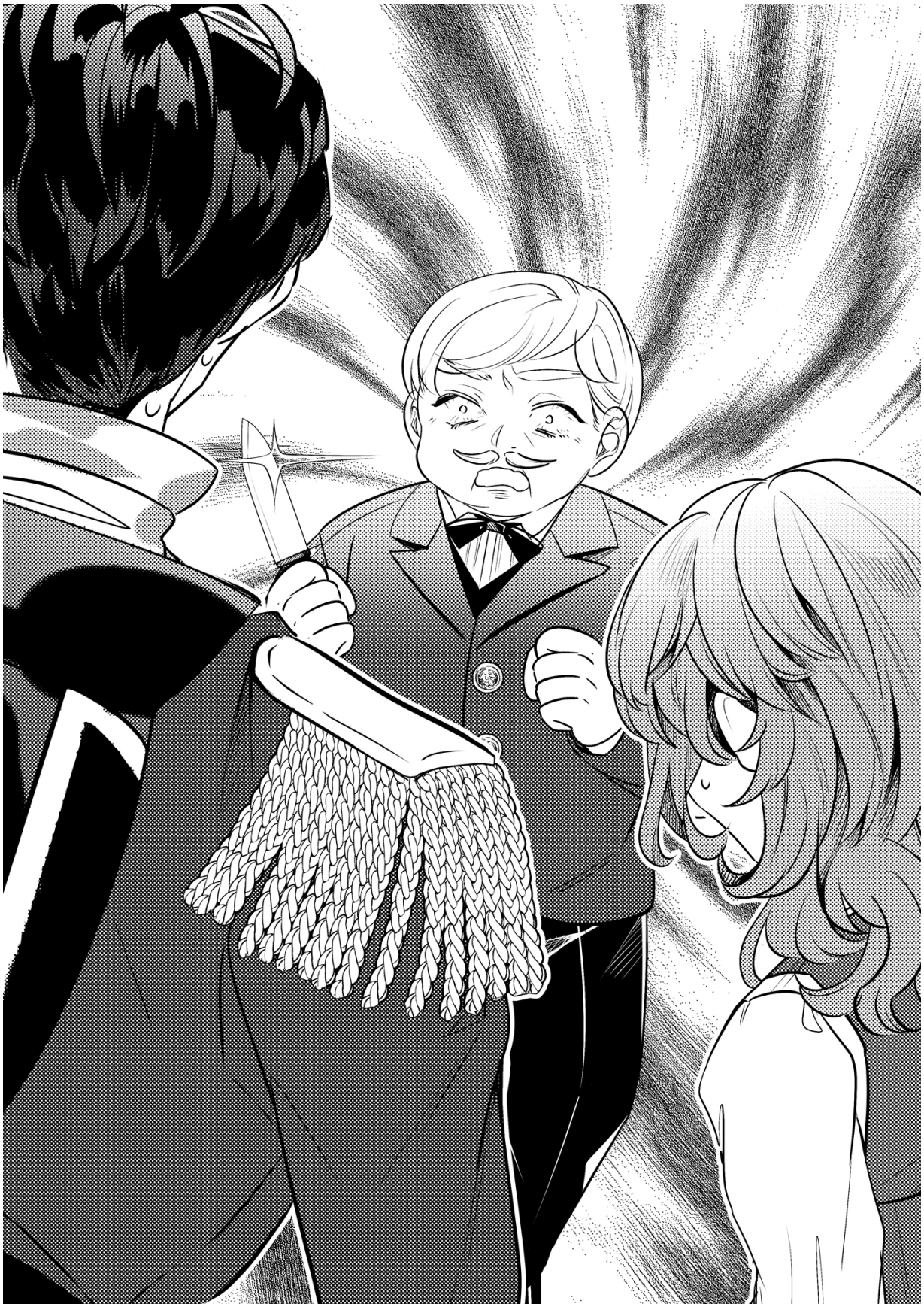
“Now, do my ears deceive me? Whose voice is it that I hear?”

The pair came back to their senses in an instant. They turned around and noticed Sewell entering the garden with a kitchen knife in his hand. His eyes were bloodshot as he gazed out across the garden. He looked just like a vengeful ghoul.

“I know! I think it’s the voice of a big bad wolf who’s trying to deceive an innocent little rabbit. Am I wrong?”

“Dad...! Dad, please put down the knife! It’s dangerous!”

“Oh, hello, Cecily. Your daddy’s making a minestrone that’s chock-full of vegetables and sausages. I’ve also made you your favorite meatballs. It’s gonna be delicious.”





“Thanks, dad. I understand, so let’s put down the knife and calm down. Take a deep breath—yes, just like that!”

Cecily flashed a glance at Zeke that said, *Run.* In the next moment, Zeke had departed without a sound.

Finally having got the knife from her father, Cecily let out a big sigh.

This is not going to be easy...

Sewell’s hearing was unmatched when it came to his daughter’s conversations. It was evident she wouldn’t be able to spend any alone time with Zeke while they were in the village. Cecily could only hold her head in despair.

Chapter 3: A Reunion with an Old Friend

The next day...

Cecily awoke in her old bedroom, got herself ready, then headed downstairs. Cecily's room was located on the far side of the house, up on the second floor. It hadn't changed in the whole year she had been away, and it seemed that Sewell had been cleaning it every now and then, for it contained no trace of dust and her sheets had a faint freshness to them, as if they had been aired outdoors.

Her beloved picture books, which she'd had to leave behind on her bookshelf, remained as they were. She must have been tired from the journey, for she had fallen asleep last night without realizing it while rereading them.

Cecily peeped into the dining room, from which an alluring smell wafted, whetting her appetite. She had thought to offer to help with the preparations, but it seemed that Sewell had woken up far earlier than her.

"Good morning, dad. I'm sorry—have you finished preparing breakfast already?"

"Oh! Morning, Cecily!"

Father and daughter had enjoyed dinner alone the night before, and Cecily could see that Sewell was in a far more tranquil mood now. He was pottering around the kitchen wearing an apron and a big smile.

"I've prepared some toasted sandwiches and potato soup. You'll eat, won't you?"

"Of course I will!"

Sewell was a househusband, and was good at cooking any and all dishes. While Cecily was growing up, he hadn't only provided the family's meals each day, but he'd also baked cakes and made

sweets. The kids in their neighborhood often came to the house for Sewell's delicious treats.

Of course, Cecily had spent the past year living alone, and although she wasn't bad at cooking now, she was nowhere near as good as her father.

I kind of wish dad had taught me how to cook and how to embroider...

Cecily let out a sad sigh in between mouthfuls of her toasted sandwich, which was stuffed with filling. In her mind, these skills were part and parcel of becoming someone's bride. She wanted to learn how to do various household chores before marrying Zeke. She knew that he would tell her she shouldn't push herself, but in her own way, Cecily wanted to become someone Zeke could rely on.

If Sewell wasn't going to or wouldn't teach her, she could maybe ask Maria. Though Maria had her hands full with her own work, so maybe she could ask Baroness Stein...?

No! I can't give up before I've even really begun.

A part of Cecily's mind had already accepted that Sewell would never come around to the idea of her marrying Zeke. In all honesty, if Sewell was *this* against their marriage, she could simply leave already, having concluded that he would never change his mind. She was sure the Stein family would warmly accept her.

All the same, she was disappointed with herself for giving up so easily.

Cecily knew that she couldn't truly be happy in a marriage that hadn't received her father's blessing. This may have been the common way of thinking, but on a personal level, too, Cecily wanted Sewell to accept her and Zeke's relationship. She loved her father, so it was natural she wanted him to celebrate the marriage and to see her off with a smile.

Zeke hasn't given up either!

Yesterday, before Zeke had left, he had slipped a handwritten note into her pocket. In it, he had told her that the group would be meeting today at just before noon, in front of Marjorika's house.

Cecily took the last mouthful of her toasted sandwich.

"Thanks for cooking, dad. It was great!"

After cleaning up the dishes, Cecily made moves to head out of the dining room. Sewell pulled a concerned look, having anticipated an enjoyable midmorning coffee with his daughter.

"Where are you heading off to?"

"Lady Lottie and I had planned to go for a walk together with everyone."

In truth, it was to discuss their next plan of action, but of course she couldn't tell Sewell that.

Cecily had been taking great care since yesterday not to mention Zeke's name. She loved Zeke, so of course this was a terribly difficult task, but it was necessary to keep Sewell calm.

"Is that right? I suppose Miss Lottie and the others are your precious friends, after all."

However, Cecily had already dashed out of the house, and didn't catch what Sewell had said.

"Over here, Cecily!"

Charlotte called out near Marjorika's house, waving as Cecily came into view. Maria, who was with her, nodded, and Cecily greeted them both.

"Where's Zeke and Sir Alphonse?"

"Some children were showing interest in those two pairs of loins, and took them away somewhere. Something about a flower field. Maria and I have decided to wait for them."

Perhaps due to having been abandoned by her personal guard, Charlotte wasn't in the best mood. She was playing with her hair awkwardly.

But the village really is peaceful...

Due to the village's very entrance being hidden from sight, anyone with ill intent wouldn't have been able to come into the village unless someone showed them the way. Cecily supposed that Alphonse had temporarily left Charlotte's side because he had deemed the village to be safe.

"Yes, there's a small flower field on the outskirts of the village. I used to play there a lot when I was small. It's a completely natural flower field, and they're rather beautiful..."

Cecily's voice trailed off. There was no way that someone like Charlotte would be interested. She was a princess, and had grown up in the palace surrounded by flowers that had won distinguished awards before being used as decoration there.

However, Charlotte showed unexpected interest.

"Is that right? Well then, let us go have a look later!"

"Sure," Cecily said, nodding with a smile.

Charlotte's own previously troubled expression relaxed as well.

"Cecily, you look brighter than usual today."

"I do?"

"Maybe 'bright' is not the right word—after all, the captain's loins said that your father's loins was against your marriage. But even so...I'm not sure exactly how to put this, but when you were with me in the palace, you were always slightly on edge, weren't you?"

Cecily nodded. She was aware of that herself.

"This is the place you were born and raised, so I'm sure this is where you feel most relaxed."

"You might be right about that."

Charlotte had been watching her far more closely than she had realized, and had picked up on a change that Cecily herself hadn't even been aware of.

It was true that Cecily was shy and an introvert, but the village was not only full of people that Cecily had known ever since she was a baby, but also people that Cecily had helped change the diapers of when they had been babies. This was the reason Cecily's expression softened and her tone of voice became so expressive here in her hometown.

"I'm happy to see that you seem well too, Lady Charlotte."

"Quite. Perhaps it's because most of the people living in this village are women...? It makes me feel at ease, I think."

"Not only that, the women here are all strong characters," Maria added.

"You said it!" Cecily and Charlotte said, before exchanging glances and chuckling.

Cecily could feel her heart growing lighter as she spoke to her friend. It was true that a large task lay ahead of her, but she was

finally back home and her friends seemed to be enjoying their time here.

In the next moment, Cecily felt something brush against her legs. She peered down to find a familiar black cat.

"Hello, Rolo. What's up?"

Rolo looked like a regular old black cat, but in truth he was a magical beast who could use simple spells. Apparently he was capable of communicating with people, but unfortunately Cecily was still unable to hear him.

Refusing to give any indication of a response, Rolo walked a short distance away from Marjorika's house before turning round to face Cecily again.

What was he trying to say? As Cecily pondered this, Charlotte tugged at Cecily's sleeve.

"Cecily, he wants you to follow him!"

"Really?"

"When animals act like this, it means they want you to follow them. It happens all the time in my books, so I'm sure of it. Let's do so!"

Without even waiting for Cecily to answer, Charlotte took Cecily by the hand and they followed Rolo. He walked ahead of them, sometimes stopping to look back around, and it became clear that he was leading them to the village entrance.

Is this a new game of his or something?

"Look. There's a crowd gathered near the village entrance," Maria said.

"You're right..."

Cecily had been so focused on watching Rolo that she hadn't noticed all the people standing near the entrance. It was the exact same scene from yesterday, just after her own return.

Has someone come back from a trip, perhaps?

As Cecily tried to peer over the crowd to see who was at the center of attention, a tall figure standing nearby caught her eye.

Zeke!

Zeke was holding some of the children's hands as he talked to Alphonse. They were facing away from her, and hadn't noticed her

arrival.

Before she could call out, one of the village witches noticed Cecily and stopped her.

"Good timing, Cecily," she said. "Someone we've not seen in a long time has just come back to the village."

"Who?"

"Oh, Cecily! It's been a while."

From the crowd, a young man came walking towards Cecily. She had no idea who this was. She blinked a few times in confusion.

Who is he?

Cecily had never seen this young man in her life. He had luscious lavender hair that reached his shoulders and alluring red eyes. His slender and somewhat feminine but well-toned figure was dressed in simple black clothes.

"Do you not remember me?" he asked, with a slightly uncertain expression.

As Cecily stared into his face, an old memory began to resurface. Cecily let out a gasp of realization as the faces of the young man before her and her childhood friend became one.

"Wait a minute... Are you Cain?"

"Yep—so you do remember me."

When she saw his face break into a smile, there was no doubt about it. Pulling Charlotte along with her, she ran up to him.

"Oh my gosh, I can't believe it! It's been so long—what, ten years?"

Cain's air was different from back then. He had been a charming young boy who could have been mistaken for a girl. He had been smaller than Cecily despite their being the same age, but now he was so tall that Cecily had to look up to see his face.

"When did you come back?"

"Literally just now. I finished my ten-year training and came home. Mrs. Greta helped bring me back."

From behind Cain, Cecily's mother gave her a big wink.

So this was the request dad mentioned.

Cecily finally understood the strange comment one of the witches had made yesterday and their slightly odd treatment of her—no one

had expected Cecily's and Cain's returns to the village to coincide like this.

"Mom, why didn't you tell me about Cain?"

Greta let out a vigorous laugh at her scowling daughter.

"The answer is obvious, my dear—because keeping schtum about it would be far more fun!"

Cecily knew not to probe the issue any further. Logic wasn't something that worked on her mother.

Still, ten years of training, huh...?

Returning her gaze to Cain, she let out a small gasp. His eyes weren't just red in her dreams, but in real life too.

"I didn't realize you were a witch too, Cain. I mean, your eyes are red, after all."

All the witches present stared at Cecily in disbelief.

"Just as I thought. It seems like you had no idea that I had magical powers, huh, Cecily?"

Cain smiled awkwardly, and one of the witches who was listening to their conversation piped up.

"Cain is the first and only boy to have been born with magical powers. His powers are a lot stronger than your average witch's, so he was sent to a larger witch village to train in order to learn how to control his magical powers. There it was decided that he will be given a special new title—he's no longer a witch, but a wizard."

"I-I see."

Cecily took a moment to process this sudden, important information.

So Cain's...pretty amazing?

In all of their long history, never before had a boy with magical powers been born into witch society. Cain was the only one of his kind in the entire world.

"It's just a simple mutation, or something like that. It's not all that special," Cain said. It seemed his modesty was unchanged from his childhood.

"I wanted to talk to you about something, Cecily. From ten years ago."

"From ten years ago?"

Cain awkwardly scratched his cheek as Cecily tried to think back to her childhood.

"Y-Yeah. I asked you to make a promise with me, remember?"

"Oh, Cecily!"

Cecily felt a wave of surprise as she heard a familiar voice call her name from behind.

Zeke and Alphonse, who were standing a short distance away, seemed to have finally noticed her arrival. Turning around, Cecily noticed that Charlotte was hiding behind her, scared of the presence of this new man.

Cecily regretted her ineptitude regarding how she'd handled the situation, and introduced Cain with a smile.

"Zeke, everyone, let me introduce you to Cain. He's an old friend of mine...though, while I say that, the last time we saw each other was ten years ago."

"A pleasure to meet you, Sir Cain. My name is Zeke."

"...Hey."

Whereas Zeke was polite as always, Cain was curt. This upset Cecily, but she decided it wasn't serious enough to point out.

Maybe he's just nervous in front of new people?

Cecily thought back on Cain as a child, and recalled vaguely that he had been incredibly shy. He'd even been nervous the first time he had met Cecily.

Cecily coughed lightly.

"Let me tell you about Zeke, Cain. He's my boyfriend."

"...What?"

Cain's face twisted in an expression of discomfort.

"Your boyfriend? This man? Really?"

"Don't be like that," Cecily said, frowning at Cain. She'd had enough of the rest of the village teasing her about Zeke. "I know what you're going to say. About how Zeke is super handsome and is wasted on someone like me."

"Hey, that's my line, Cecily," Zeke said. "There's no woman like you in the entire world."

"Oh, Zeke, stop that!"

"It doesn't take much for these two to start fawning over each

other," one of the witches said as the crowd began to gossip amongst themselves, too quietly for Cecily and the others to hear.

However, Cain simply continued to stare intensely at Zeke.

"Um, Cain? Is something the matter?"

"Ah! No, I'm fine," Cain said, with a shake of his head.

A silence fell over the group. Then, Greta spoke loudly so that everyone present could hear.

"We'll be having a party at the assembly hall tonight. It's to celebrate Cecily's and Cain's returns, but it can also be a welcome party for Zeke and the others. Oh, and a 'Time to rest your weary legs, beautiful Mrs. Greta' party as well. Cecily, dear, you'll lend a hand with the preparations, won't you?"

"I think that's too many different kinds of parties..."

"Don't sweat the small stuff, now!"

Cecily shook her head in exasperation.

"A party tonight, Lady Lottie. Sounds exciting, does it not?" Maria said.

"Maybe... I'm a bit worried about all the loins I don't know who will be there..."

"But my lady, you spoke to Cecily's father with no issue, did you not?"

"Well, that was because he was more like a lovable bear mascot than a pair of loins."

"Bears are dangerous, you realize?"

"He seemed less like a real bear and more like a raccoon bear to me," Alphonse quipped.

As the others chatted around her, Cecily couldn't help but think on Cain's behavior. It had felt as if he was staring daggers at Zeke just now...

Maybe it's my imagination.

Cain was a kindhearted boy. He wouldn't glare at someone he had just met for the first time. Cecily chalked it up to simply having misinterpreted his expression.

✧ ✧ ✧

Preparations for the party continued with no major hiccups. The assembly hall wasn't a building with much pomp to it—it was chiefly used as a place to teach children or for them to have sleepovers and the like.

Cecily had been tasked with decorating the hall. She hung up a cream-colored curtain decorated with artificial flowers, and laid out a similarly colored rug. Next, she set out lace place mats on the tea table, and decorated the vases with beautiful flowers plucked from the flower field. Maria was the lady-in-waiting for the Snowflower Palace and so gave some advice as Cecily decorated in line with her fine sensibilities.

Maria is incredible... The assembly hall looks completely different.

The children were overjoyed about the assembly hall's bright transformation. Perhaps their preferences were burned into their genes, for almost all witches favored blacks and reds. The assembly hall usually had a dark and gloomy atmosphere or perhaps the feeling of a night-house, but now it was full of warmth and cheer.

When evening came, all the doors leading to the garden and balconies would be opened so that people could go in and out as they pleased. Cecily imagined that the room, set aglow by the warmth of candles, would make for a captivating scene.

As Cecily came to the end of her duties, she thought again about Cain.

It's been ten whole years. I wanted to talk to him a bit more.

She had invited Cain to join her, but he had apologized, saying that he was tired from his long journey.

His parents had remained behind in the large witch village. It seemed like they enjoyed life there because they had decided to stay.

Ten years had been enough training for Cain, and so Greta had brought him home now that he had permission to return. However, his plans from here on out had yet to be decided.

After leaving Cecily, Cain had headed to the Ramps family home. The house had a guest room, and Greta had said that she'd allowed him to use it.

"Without further ado...cheers!"

Cecily came back to herself with a gasp.

"Ch-Cheers!" she said, lifting her glass.

The other witches had quickly finished their drinks and were already going for more. Maybe it was because they often tested their potions on themselves, but most witches loved alcohol.

It was evening already—the party had just begun.

Cecily was sixteen, and so was legally an adult. However, she didn't really have a taste for alcohol, and sipped her grape juice instead.

The tables were covered in a plethora of delicious-looking dishes. Sewell had whipped up some meals for the occasion too, apparently.

"Cheeeers!"

Cecily felt someone bump into her waist as she heard this voice. She turned around and saw Charlotte, who was walking with unsteady feet.

"Lady Lottie, are you...drunk?"

"Of course...I'm not!" Charlotte said, slurring her words. She certainly didn't *sound* sober. "It's fine—I'm drinking alcohol-free drinks! Cheeeers!"

"Sober people don't slur their words and say 'cheers' every other sentence, my lady," Alphonse said, snatching the glass from Charlotte's hand.

"What do you know, stupid Alphonse's loins!"

"Yes, yes, that's me—Alphonse's loins," Alphonse said, trying to appease her.

Cecily glanced around the assembly hall looking for Zeke. She found him quickly, or rather, she spotted the crowd of middle-aged witches twittering around him first.

A wave of annoyance passed over Cecily. Most witches prized their looks, so Zeke was surrounded by a whole crowd of beautiful women. Cecily had told them not to make any moves on him, but it seemed that Zeke was irrepressibly popular.

But I know what Zeke is like.

Cecily knew Zeke's personality better than anyone else—he was a kind man. She knew that, just like when he dealt with suspicious people in the capital, if he gave them one sharp glance, he could

easily prevent any woman from even getting close to him.

But look how much he's enjoying their attention!

Cecily started to grumble about how gentlemanly Zeke was in talking to everyone around him. She knew exactly why he was being so polite—Zeke couldn't let himself be rude to all these women to whom he owed a debt for having taken care of Cecily. She knew that he wasn't flirting with them, not really; he was merely doing his best to enjoy a conversation with these women who had been a big part of Cecily's life.

Because of that, Cecily felt it was her duty to give the women around him a stern telling-off.

Zeke's my *man!*

Yes, she had every right to say something.

"Excuse m—"

"Hey, Cecily. It's been a minute."

It was Cain. He had appeared right in front of her just as she was heading towards Zeke and his crowd. She stopped and spoke to him.

"Hello, Cain. Have you rested up?"

"Yeah. Sewell looked after me," Cain said, with a gentle smile. In his hand was a glass. The pink liquid inside the glass swayed slightly.

Where did he get this drink?

Cecily hadn't seen any drink of this color being prepared. For some reason, she couldn't tear her eyes away from it—it just looked so delicious. Her face, as reflected in the glass, seemed lost in thought.

Noticing that she was interested in his drink, he proffered up the glass to her.

"Here—this is for you, from me. To celebrate our reunion."

"Thanks," Cecily said, with a smile. Yes, Cain hadn't changed. He was as kind as he always was.

As Cecily took the glass, a witch standing nearby couldn't help but say, "Oh!"

"Hm?"

The witch looked at Cecily, the glass, Cain, and then the glass again.

"It's nothing," she said with a chuckle, before leaving them be.

Cecily was curious as to what was going on, for a number of others nearby exchanged glances. However, no one said a thing.

What's gotten into them?

Perhaps it was due to the experience from his job, but Zeke had picked up that something wasn't right. He came over, and from elsewhere Alphonse began approaching her too.

Zeke's expression was stern. However, as soon as Cecily caught a glimpse of the women clamoring around him, a rush of frustration came over her. She turned back to Cain and threw back her drink.

"Cecily, hold on!" Zeke called out. "I've got a bad feeling!"

"Huh?"

She heard him, but she'd already lifted the glass. The strangely sweet-smelling liquid flowed down her throat. As soon as she'd finished the drink, the glass slipped from her hand.

"Careful!"

Cain caught the glass before it crashed to the floor. But the glass was the least of Cecily's worries.

M-My throat's...on fire!

She placed both hands on her neck. As soon as she had swallowed that sweet drink, her throat started to burn with heat. She felt sweat beading up across her body. Her vision was hazy. She couldn't stand properly. Zeke rushed over her to grab her shoulders and steady her.

Cecily's eyes were closed tightly shut in pain as she panted heavily.

"Cecily? What's wrong?"

She didn't reply.

"*Cecily*!"

Cecily pulled away from Zeke without a word or even a look. Her gaze was unfocused, and she seemed a little dazed. And then, before a speechless crowd, she leaned into Cain.

"Oh, Cain... I love you!"

Cain's lips curled up in a triumphant smile.

"...I don't believe it," Charlotte whispered. Though she had been drunk on the atmosphere of the party, she'd immediately come to her senses. She and Alphonse exchanged glances. "Th-This is a

disaster."

Or perhaps, this was a mere warning of a greater disaster that was to come. It was natural for Charlotte to be so shaken up—Cecily, who had loved Zeke from the bottom of her heart, was now cozying up to some other man.

It was Zeke who managed to recover and make the first move. He grabbed Cain's shirt as he glared fiercely at him.

"What did you do to Cecily?!"

"What did I do? I gave her a beverage. A little drink called...a love potion."

"You—!" Zeke was speechless.

However, Cain continued with no trace of guilt whatsoever.

"I told a little white lie earlier. I wasn't actually going to rest—I was actually borrowing the Rampses' household workshop. It was my first time whipping up a love potion, but I gotta say, it seems to have gone pretty well. Well, I *am* a genius, after all."

Cain's eyes glittered with derision as he scowled back at Zeke.

"Look at you go, Cain! Stealing a woman from right under her man's nose!" Greta called out, riling them up—all while cutting up her steak.

Zeke's breath caught in his throat as he stepped away from Cain. So Greta had known what kind of potion Cain had been holding from the start.

"Why didn't you stop him?" he said, unable to keep an accusatory tone out of his voice. However, Greta and the other witches merely snickered.

"Zeke, stealing someone's lover is fair game in witch society. Cecily's the one at fault here for not realizing what she was being given."

"She really needs to whip herself back into shape," another woman said.

The witches spoke among themselves as if this were nothing. However, Charlotte couldn't help but quiver.

"Th-This is normal in witch society?"

It seemed that common sense differed between witches and other people. Charlotte couldn't believe that stealing someone's

loved one could be normal.

"...Stay there, Your Royal Highness," Alphonse said. He must have been equally shocked, for he had forgotten to use Charlotte's pseudonym.

As the party's excitement reached its peak—for a different reason than it should've—heavy footsteps announced the arrival of the raccoon-dog-like Sewell.

"Cecily, daddy's here! I've finished cooking, so I've come to enjoy the party."

"Hello, Sewell."

"Oh, Cain! Did you manage to rest up?"

Cain grinned back at Sewell.

"Yes, I did, thanks. I have a question. I wish to marry Cecily—is that all right with you?"

"You knave!"

Zeke had stepped forward towards Cain once again, speaking up before Sewell could answer. A white blade was pointed right at the defenseless Cain's throat. A few people screamed.

This wasn't the usual sword that hung at his waist. He had put that away before coming to the village. This was a dagger for self-defense that he kept by his breast at all times.

His hazel eyes blazed with fury. Cain glared back with a disgruntled expression. Despite the blade pointed right at him, he showed no trace of discomposure on his face.

"Mr. Knight, that's dangerous. Don't pull out a weapon at a party!"

"Quiet. I'll cut that tongue right from your mouth."

"Is it the done thing to point a weapon at an unarmed civilian?"

"Cool it, Zeke," Alphonse said, trying to appease Zeke—it was just as Cain had said. However, Zeke, in his unbridled anger, paid him no heed.

"Not only that," Cain went on, "Cecily and I actually already promised to get married."

"What was that?"

"Ten years ago, we made a promise. That we would get married when we next met."

“Who’d believe this hogwash after what you just pulled?”

“It doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not, Mr. Knight—it’s the truth.”

Even when pushed right to the edge, Zeke couldn’t stop Cain’s mocking attitude.

As everyone watched with sweaty palms and bated breath, a small voice called out. One so delicate it almost vanished before it had begun.

“P-Please stop that, Sir Zeke!”

“Cecily?”

It was Cecily. With quivering steps, she stood in front of Cain and spread her arms out wide to protect him. Zeke could see fear in her red eyes, but still, she firmly stood up to him. She mustered up her courage and finally spoke.

“Please don’t hurt Cain. He... He’s important to me!”

Zeke was dumbfounded. Cain smirked in response.

“Thanks, Cecily. You protected me.”

“D-Don’t put yourself in such dangerous situations!”

“I know, but I didn’t realize how much of a barbarian this knight here was!”

Returning his dagger to its sheath, Zeke looked on in bewilderment at the pair talking amicably.

Zeke’s body swayed suddenly. It seemed almost as if he were about to fall, but he steadied himself with his next step before turning to leave the assembly hall.

In the next moment, the silent assembly hall erupted with noise.

“Oh, poor Zekey. Maybe I should go take care of him.”

“You cruel woman—going after a man with an injured heart!”

Many in the crowd were sympathetic towards Zeke, but none followed him. They were still reeling from the murderous stare he had given Cain. Even the bravest witches among them were scared that if they approached him so soon after this incident, he wouldn’t hesitate to cut them down.

As for Sewell, he had collapsed in a corner. He had fainted after the second man in two days had asked for his daughter’s hand in marriage. However, no one paid him any heed.

Charlotte, after having witnessed the whole affair, made a commanding proclamation.

"This looks like a job for Detective Lottie!"

"Uh, and who is Detective Lottie?"

Charlotte was currently obsessed with a new romance book. The title was *The Lady Detective Hunted by a Phantom Thief: Secret Nights Hidden from Sight and from the Guard.* Naturally, the author was none other than Cyril, AKA Cee Rill, whom Charlotte admired.

Alphonse shook his head in disbelief, but Charlotte paid him no mind.

"Listen up, Alphonse's loins. I loved seeing Cecily so happy with the captain's loins, so I can't just let this matter slide. Stealing someone who is in love with someone else is not right!"

Charlotte adored the love triangles in her novels, but knew that forcibly stealing someone away was unfair.

"Right, I understand. So, what's the plan?" Alphonse glanced over at Cain and Cecily, who were talking as if nothing had happened. "That Cain guy... He slipped Cecy a love potion. But there isn't an antidote, right? Wouldn't the best move be to wait a few days until it wears off?"

Greta had told them all before that love potions didn't last forever—only a few days at best. Maybe that was one reason everyone in the room was relatively calm. They knew that Cain would only have Cecily's heart temporarily.

"Not only that," Alphonse added, "they promised to get married, right? I mean, that might've only been a bluff by Cain, but if it's true, then I don't think this is something we can butt into."

"I don't think they did agree to that." The new detective spoke with confidence. "Cain's loins was acting a bit strangely when he brought up the promise. I'll look into that, so follow me, loins!"

"What? I have to join you?"

"Naturally! You're my guard, aren't you?"

Charlotte gave a contented grin. Maybe she was only faking confidence, but to Alphonse, the princess who was leaping into action to save her friend looked awfully reliable.

“Right—what’s our first stop?”

“We first,” Charlotte said, with a firm stare, “need to get my detective’s outfit! A magnifying glass is an absolute necessity!”

Charlotte was the type of person to do things in the way she thought was proper.

Side Story: Detective Lottie Is on the Case, Part 1

On the morning of their third day in the witch village...

There, waiting in the hallway near the front door, was Charlotte—not dressed in her usual attire, but wearing a detective's outfit. The home, of course, belonged to Marjorika, who was still kindly allowing them to stay.

Atop Charlotte's head was a ribboned beret. Her long hair was styled into two plaits. In her small hand was a magnifying glass. It was the perfect getup.

Of course, Maria had helped Princess Charlotte—nay, Detective Lottie—to get dressed. Even if this outfit was a simpler affair than usual, she still needed the help of her lady-in-waiting.

Now that she was ready to go, Lottie adjusted the angle of her beret as she spoke to her assistant.

"Alphonse's loins. Have you seen the captain's loins?"

"Hmm, I don't think he's up yet. I left his breakfast in front of his room," Alphonse said, with a troubled smile.

"What a pain that pair of loins is being right now."

Though Lottie complained, she wasn't berating Zeke. The captain had always performed his role reliably, in a calm and collected manner, so his behavior last night had come as a complete shock. She couldn't simply ignore him after seeing him look so angry and hurt. He was probably too depressed to get out of bed. If that was the case, then Lottie had decided that she and her assistant would do their best to resolve the whole affair.

Alphonse glanced around the foyer. "Hm? Where's Maria?"

"Maria went out with Marjorika. To learn about medicinal herbs, apparently."

The medicines that the witches concocted were special. Of

course, they could make special potions that could remedy baldness or get someone to fall in love with you, but they also concocted normal medicines that could heal maladies like colds, headaches, and stomachaches, to name but a few.

Each potion contained a delicate balance of medicinal herbs, which meant that they were famed for having few side effects. Maria had announced that this was an indispensable opportunity to learn about them, and so she'd headed out right after helping Lottie get dressed.

Lottie sighed, feeling as though Maria was also a handful. However, she didn't berate her lady-in-waiting, for she knew that the reason Maria had gone off to learn about medicines was to care for her husband, who often fell ill.

And so, as Maria was so busy, she had selected Alphonse—who had nothing but time on his hands—to be her assistant.

"Right then, off to Cecily we go!"

"Okey dokey."

"Be serious about this!"

"Roger that..."

Following Alphonse, who was barely stifling a yawn, Lottie bounded out of Marjorika's house.

"There she is!"

Lottie had a keen eye, so it only took her all of three seconds to locate Cecily. She was walking with Cain on the lane in front of the house, the pair seemingly enjoying one another's company.

"Cecily!"

At the sound of her name, Cecily turned around. Her eyes were drawn instantly to Lottie's outfit. Looking her friend up and down, she couldn't help but exclaim, "Why, Lady Lottie, you look so cute!"

"I do? Hold on—that's not what's important!"

Lottie didn't mind the compliment, but she knew that she had to take charge of the conversation.

"Don't call me 'Lady Lottie'! Just Lottie is fine!"

That was what was important.

"Oh—sorry, Lottie."

"It's okay, don't worry."

Lottie quickly forgave her friend, then hid behind said friend as she glowered at Cain.

"You. Cain's loins, was it?"

"Uh, what's this about loins?"

Cain looked back at Lottie with an expression of confusion. His delicate air tended to draw attention, and he was the textbook definition of a handsome young man. However, Lottie's beauty was unparalleled, even by him—if he were a painting, then Lottie would surely be a sculpture—and she felt no stirrings of romance for him.

"Never mind that. Cain's loins, you don't intend to do anything untoward to Cecily on this 'date' of yours, do you?"

"A d-date?" Cecily said, fidgeting nervously in embarrassment. Her behavior vexed Lottie greatly. Cain glanced at Cecily before giving Lottie a cheerful grin.

"Well, we *are* lovers, so I suppose we may end up doing things that you usually don't mention in front of others."

"E-E-Excuse me?!" Lottie couldn't suppress an earsplitting shriek.

It was unthinkable that this man would dare to even say such shameful things on the second day after reuniting with Cecily after a decade. Not only that, but Cecily was still fully under the effects of the love potion—how *dare* he!

"A-Absolutely not! I forbid it. I'll be following you to make sure you don't perform any such lascivious acts on Cecily!"

"I'm not quite sure what you're talking about, but please don't. I couldn't bear being the victim of such boorishness."

Lottie's reply caught in her throat. Shameless though he may have been, he had a point. Lottie knew that she was acting uncouth right now, but Cecily's judgment was still affected by the love potion. She could end up walking down a path that she might later regret simply because Cain had told her to do so. Lottie didn't want to see Cecily despairing over her betrayal of Zeke once the effects of the love potion did finally wear off.

"And what's your estimation of all this, Cecily?" Cain asked Cecily, who had been silent until now.

Lottie looked at Cecily expectantly, but Cecily's face twisted into an expression of guilt.

“I’m sorry, Lottie. It’s been so long since I’ve seen Cain, so I’d like to catch up with him alone.”

A shock rippled through Lottie, as though she’d been struck on the back of the head.

“O-Of course. Sorry for getting in your way.”

After this proclamation, Lottie walked off as if nothing at all had happened. Her magnifying glass in hand, she kept on walking without any particular direction in mind, until finally...she came to a stop in a deserted area.

Seeing that Lottie had stopped, Alphonse called out to her.

“Are you upset, Lottie?”

“Not in the slightest,” she said, after a pause. She slumped to the ground, pulling her knees close. Her slender shoulders began to shake. Alphonse sighed.

“I’d like to offer some consolation, but you’d prefer not to be touched by a man, wouldn’t you, Lottie?”

Lottie was silent for a few moments.

“I’ll make an exception for today, if it is only for a little while,” she finally said, after an intense internal battle between the conflicting emotions of her phobia of men and her upset feelings after being treated so coldly.

She pulled off her beret with forced nonchalance. Her hair was tousled and a bit sweaty from wearing the hat all morning.

“But I do only mean a little. You may touch me with only your pinky. That’s all I shall allow.”

“Very well.”

Alphonse had come a ways in approaching Lottie. He knew that coming from behind would surprise her, and that getting too close would make her scream. Instead, he squatted down a short distance away and reached a hand out to her. He folded his fingers into his hand apart from his pinky and began to gently stroke her head. His finger gently caressed Lottie’s rose-gold hair, near her whorl.

Unsure of this feeling and whether it constituted actually being touched or not, Lottie took on an expression of confusion.

“Um... You may stroke my head a little more properly than that. I will allow it.”

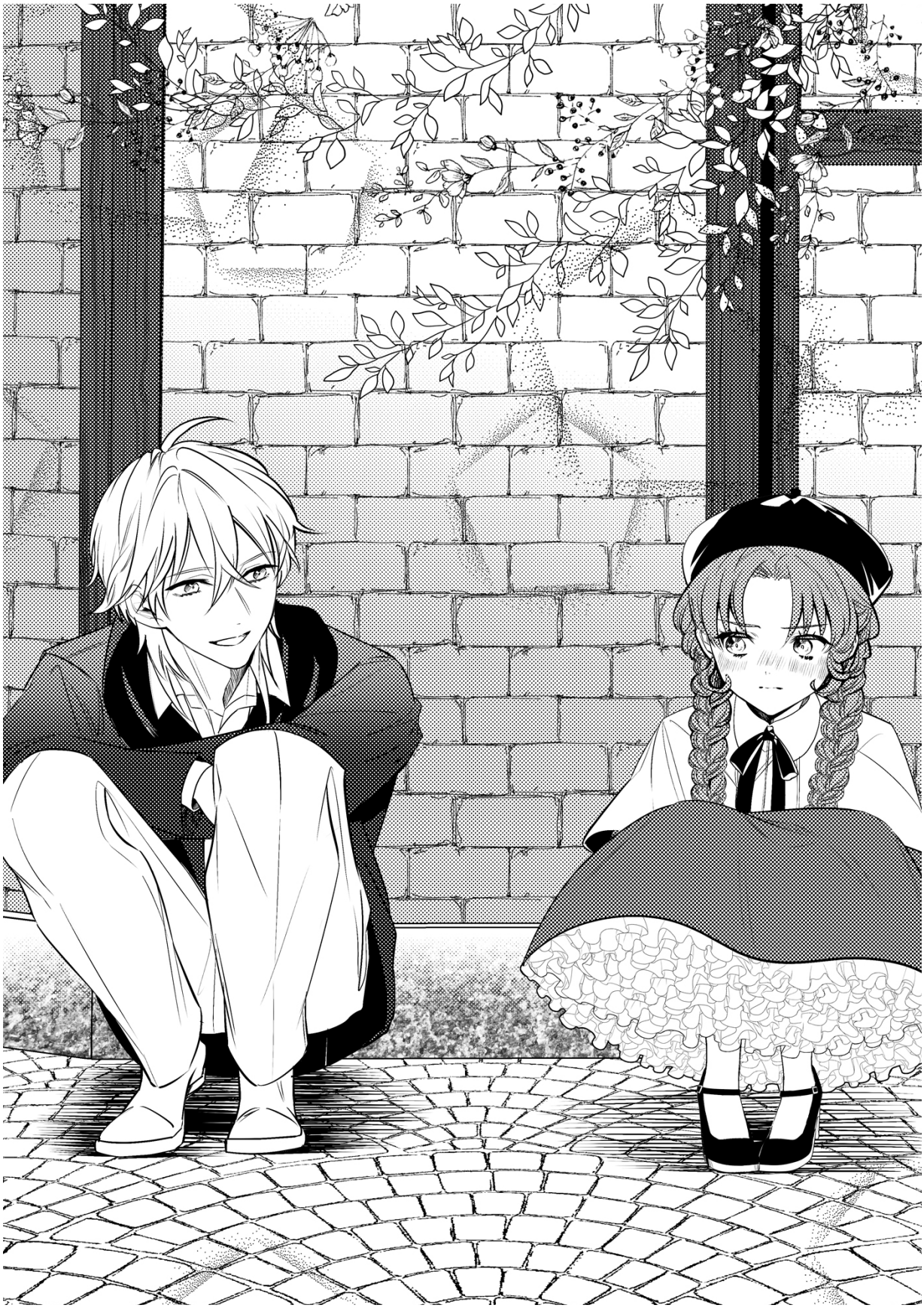
"You're shaking."

"I am *not* shaking!"

Alphonse grinned at Lottie's obstinate remark.

"Do you feel a little better?"

Lottie's cheeks were like two red apples. She was fully aware of how she was blushing, and pulled her hair in front of her face. Of course, it was clear to anyone that she was red with embarrassment, but she wasn't aware that hiding her embarrassment amounted to admitting it.





"You really are overbearing, you know that? And quit calling me Lottie."

"Huh? I thought you wanted everyone to call you Lottie."

"I feel weird when *you* call me that, Alphonse's loins."

"Ouch," Alphonse said, before letting out a loud chuckle from...not very near Lottie at all. She couldn't help but smile along.

"Now then. What do you suggest we do next?"

"Good question," Lottie said as she stood up. She was done moping around. A detective is not someone who allows themselves to remain idle. "I'm afraid that there's nothing we can do in regard to the Cecily case. Until we're able to find a clue to help us actually make any headway, I think we should find another case to work on. We've got the time for it."

Alphonse thought it was a bit early for Lottie to be giving up, but he held his tongue. He couldn't bear to dampen Lottie's mood after she had finally perked up a little again.

Fortunately for Lottie, who was keen to move on from her setback, another possible client came knocking almost straightaway.

"Lottie! Nana's gone missing! Could you help us?"

It was a little boy and a little girl. Both of them were among the children who had been playing with Lottie yesterday, and they seemed keen to ask the older girl for some help.

"Well now," Lottie said, resting her chin between thumb and forefinger in contemplation. "Who might this Nana be?"

"Nana's our cat!" the boy said plainly. Apparently, their family cat had gone missing last night. Their feline companion sometimes left the house for hours at a time, but they had grown worried, as this was the first time the cat's absence had lasted more than a day.

After hearing their story, Lottie let out a gallant proclamation. "Very well! Leave this case to Detective Lottie!"

"Really? Thanks, Lottie!"

Even searching for a lost cat was among a detective's duties. An elementary task though it might have been, it would serve as a good diversion. Not only that, this boy and girl were sure to be overjoyed should their cat be found. The cat too, indubitably. The situation would result in everyone winning.

"Is this Nana of yours a boy or a girl?"

"He's a boy."

Lottie whipped out a piece of parchment. A means by which to take notes was also an absolute necessity for any detective.

"Very good. Now then, could you list some distinguishing features of Nana's loins here? If you could draw a sketch too, that would be marvelous."

"Okay. Um, just his loins?" the girl said.

"Draw his whole body if you can," Alphonse interjected. An assistant was needed when the detective had a way of speaking that was so easily misconstrued.

"Are you sure you can actually find him?" the boy whispered to himself, evidently feeling the pair might not be very reliable after all.

"Silence, boy's loins. Everything lies within the realm of possibility for Detective Lottie!"

"Uh, right," the boy said, taken aback by this pretty young woman who said "loins" every other sentence.

The boy and girl announced that they would look around the west side of the village, so Lottie and Alphonse were tasked with checking the east side. The village wasn't that large, so the two groups were sure to bump into one another if they kept up their search for an hour.

Scanning the parchment that had been returned to her, Lottie committed Nana's traits to memory. *He has big round eyes, he meows, he likes bright-red tomatoes...* Well, this wasn't the most useful of lists.

Just as Lottie had reached the end of the list, a sudden rustle made her jump. Something had just fallen from a tree!

"Eep! It's Rolo's loins!"

Cecily's cat's sudden appearance startled Lottie. She was about to hide behind Alphonse, but remembering that he, too, was a man, she instead crouched behind the nearby wall of someone's house.

"Can you not stand male cats either, my lady?"

"I-It's not that I can't stand them. It's just that I'm not the...best at dealing with them."

In other words, she couldn't stand them.

"B-But it's fine. Rolo's a cat too—his sense of smell will be most helpful in locating one of his brethren. I permit you to accompany us in the search for Nana's loins."

Lottie stepped out from behind the wall and began walking to continue the search with quivering steps. Rolo followed silently.

"Nana's loooins! Heeere, Nana's loooins!" Lottie called, in her clear, bell-like voice. Unfortunately, Lottie was putting far more stress on the "loins" part than on Nana's actual name, so it was unlikely that he would come running even if he heard her. Not only that, bystanders were watching with bewilderment written over their faces.

All the same, Lottie fixated earnestly on the mission ahead of them. The desire to safely deliver Nana back to his family bubbled within her.

"So then, how's your first-ever journey been?" Alphonse said.

"What's all of this?" Lottie said, with scorn that could be detected in her expression, but not her voice. "Well, there have been a few odd characters, but all the villagers are delightful."

"I see."

"They are the same as inhabitants of other towns and villages—royal subjects whom the royal family has a duty to protect. For that reason, I am glad that we came along to the witch village. Yes, I am still concerned about what happened to Cecily, and so I won't deign to ignore it."

Lottie—no, Charlotte—was nobly moving forward. Although the princess had a tendency to be scared by the world, it was in times like these that her faithful and honest personality showed itself.

"Your life's gotten heaps more fun since meeting Cecy, right, my lady?"

"Y-You think? Well, Cecily is my one and only best friend, so I am merely playing my part."

Even though Charlotte was too embarrassed to say it out loud, in truth, meeting Cecily had given her so much. If Cecily hadn't come into her life, she might never have been able to grow closer to the members of the Celestial Knight Brigade, let alone go on a journey out of the palace.

“Though I was the one who wanted to make you smile most,” Alphonse said quietly. Catching his whisper, Lottie stopped in her tracks.

“Alphonse’s loins, I imagine you say that to just about every woman.”

Alphonse looked at her in silence as Lottie twitched her nose and sniffed.

“I advise you to stop—it’s the sort of sugary sweet expression you find in romance novels. If you say that to each and every woman you meet, one day you’ll end up with a knife in you. Stabbed right in the back! Stab! Stabby stab!”

Apparently, one stab wouldn’t suffice. As for Alphonse, he just gave a nebulous smile and shrugged.

“You don’t need to worry about that. I’m only saying this stuff to one person.”

“Is that so? Then good.”

If he were saying these things to but one person, then there was no issue. Lottie nodded in affirmation before continuing with the search.

“Nana’s loooins! Heeere, loinsy loinsy loinsy!”

They looked in trees, opened trash cans, and peered down alleyways, but they couldn’t find Nana.

As the sun rose higher into the sky, Lottie—whose stamina wasn’t very great—started to show signs of weariness. However, Alphonse was the one who next came to a stop. With a puzzled expression, he looked behind them at Rolo, who had begun drinking from one of the village’s streams.

“What are you doing back there? Let’s get a move on, Alphonse’s loins.”

Simply following in silence wasn’t the role of a detective’s assistant—he should at times offer comments that might give Lottie the flash of inspiration she needed. That was an important part of his role.

“A question, my lady.”

“Yes? What?”

“This cat...wouldn’t happen to be Nana, would he?”

Lottie blinked a few times in confusion, her long lashes swaying. This was an unexpected remark.

"Whatever are you on about? That cat is Rolo's loins."

"Yeah, but he doesn't reply when I call 'Rolo,' does he?"

"And he doesn't reply when I call out 'Nana's loins.'"

That was true, yes, but now that Lottie thought about it, cats didn't usually answer when called in the first place. Cats are a capricious sort, after all.

"Also, don't you remember? Nana's loins is white," Lottie said, as she presented the illustrated parchment to Alphonse. The drawing was done in black ink, with Nana's body left blank.

"It's true that Nana's not colored in, but isn't that because it would be hard to draw his features if he was covered in black ink?"

The girl had taken care to draw big, round eyes—if she had used black ink all over Nana's body, then this feature would have been lost. Such went Alphonse's argument.

Realizing that Alphonse's words had some sense to them, Lottie politely followed this train of argument. "That reminds me. Witches do like black and red..."

"Yeah, that's what Cecy said."

Cecily had said that this was a trait common among witches. It wouldn't have been strange for many witches to gladly own cats of these colors.

"But cats with red fur are a rare sort. So I suppose that would mean that most people in this village would have black cats," Lottie ventured.

"Seems pretty likely to me."

After all, Greta's cat, Rolo, was also black.

As Lottie pondered this, she looked down at the black cat who was scratching at a branch at her feet.

"Listen here, Rolo's loins! Or should I say—Nana's loins!" she announced, almost as if cornering a criminal suspect. "Allow me to reveal your identity. You're Nana's loins, aren't you?! Answer me!"

"My lady, I doubt you'll get an answer..."

But then...

"No, I am Rolo."

...an answer came.

It wasn't a meow or a mewl, but words spoken in a human tongue. No, that wasn't quite right—it was as if while Rolo was meowing, words were transmitted directly into their heads.

"Did he just speak?" Lottie asked.

"I...think he did."

The pair looked nervously at one another. Lottie's jaw was half open in shock. Alphonse bravely ventured another question.

"So, uh, you're Rolo? Is that right?"

"Indeed. And what of it?"

He sounded rather pompous, but there was no doubt that it was Rolo who had just replied to Alphonse's query.

Alphonse couldn't believe it—right before their very eyes, a cat was talking to them! He was certainly shocked, but as the detective was frozen in complete disbelief, it was up to him to continue the conversation.

"V-Very well. Then where could Nana be, then?"

He had intended for this remark to be directed at Lottie, but a surprising answer came from the talking cat.

"He's in my shadow, wouldn't you know."

"He...? Huh?"

In his shadow?

The pair looked on in absolute confusion, then noticed that Rolo's long shadow was quivering slightly. It seemed as if it was swaying like a tree in the breeze when, in the next moment, a white cat came slinking out from it.

The cat had big, round eyes. Yes, there was no mistake—these cute round eyes could belong to none other than Nana, Alphonse was certain of it.

"Whew! Now that was a nice dip—the water was just fine. Thank ya, Rolo," the white cat said, sounding like a countryside lad who looked up to the older Rolo.

It was hard to believe, but yes—the white cat was also talking right into their minds.

"Nana, your owner, that girl, she's been searching for you. I'd advise you to head home posthaste."

“You gotta be kiddin’ me! For serious? Jeez, what a pain in the... Right, I should get to jettin’ off back home. Catch ya later, Rolo.”

And with that, the white cat, Nana, dashed off down the road back home.

From a short distance away, a high-pitched squeal could be heard. The pair could easily imagine the teary young girl scooping her little cat up into her arms in joy.

Wrinkling his nose at the noise, Rolo poked out his small tongue.

“Is the matter thus resolved?”

“Y-Yeah. Thanks a bunch,” Alphonse said, bowing his head deferentially.

“Pay it no heed,” Rolo answered simply, before leaping up onto a roof and disappearing from sight.

Lottie observed Rolo through her magnifying glass until he was gone.

“Alphonse... It seems like anything goes in a witch village, huh?”

“You said it...”

And so the pair merely stood in bewildered silence as they pondered what had just happened to them.

Chapter 4: A Stolen Heart

As Alphonse and Charlotte in her detective getup disappeared from view, Cain collected himself and smiled at Cecily.

"Right then, shall we be off?"

"Yeah," Cecily said, returning his smile. However, she felt a nagging in her heart.

What I just did to Lady Charlotte wasn't right...

Charlotte had come all the way to Cecily's hometown, and now here Cecily was, brushing Charlotte aside to spend more time with her lover. She made a mental note to apologize to Charlotte properly later.

"So, Cain, where are we going today?"

"Let's see... First up, we'll visit the chapel, then the canteen, then the herb garden. Then, last of all, let's head to the flower field. We played there a lot, so it's an important place for us."

"Yeah, there weren't too many other places to play in the village, after all," Cecily said, with an awkward smile. One of the rules forbade children from leaving the village on their own, as it was said to be dangerous out there. The games the children played in the village relied on a hefty dose of imagination and suspended disbelief.

Saying that, I did go out of the village sometimes, on little adventures.

Cain had been an even shyer and more nervous child than Cecily, so she had never invited him on one of these outings. She decided to keep quiet about it, as it wouldn't do to bring it up now and upset him.

"There was a makeshift swing on the big tree in the flower field, wasn't there? I wonder if we can still use it," Cain said.

"There was. But they took it down a few years ago."

Some of the witches had deemed that the wooden seat was too old and damaged to be safe for children and had gotten rid of the

swing. A new one had yet to be installed.

"I see... That's a shame." Cain's disappointment was evident.

As they continued their walk around the village, Cecily broached the topic that had been on her mind.

"What was the village you went to for your training like, Cain?"

"It's far to the east of here. Like how this village is disguised in a mountain, that village is disguised deep in a forest."

"Oh, wow. I lived in a forest too."

"You did?" Cain said, with a touch of surprise.

Cecily nodded. "After I was forced out of the village last year when I turned fifteen, I ended up in the forest near the royal capital. A lot happened over the past year, but I ended up meeting Lady Lottie and the others."

"I never asked—Lottie's a noble, isn't she?"

Her looks and general air were a far cry from your regular commoner.

"Yeah, that's right," Cecily replied. They weren't trying to hide that Lottie wasn't a noble, but at this moment, Cecily refrained from mentioning her royal status. "I mean, Lady Lottie's rather beautiful, isn't she? She has capable people looking after her. Sir Alphonse jokes around a lot, but he's hugely talented. Then there's her lady-in-waiting Maria, who performs her role perfectly."

"Uh-huh..."

Cecily wanted to say more, but Cain sounded apathetic. Maybe he just wasn't interested in what she had to say? Not only that, for some reason, her throat felt tight when she talked about her friends...

How strange...

"What's wrong, Cecily?" Cain said with a puzzled expression, stopping to look back at her. "Come on, let's go. Oh—are you hungry, maybe?"

"Cain... Something feels off."

"What do you mean?"

"I... Why is it that I decided to come back to the witch village?"

Cain's shoulders quivered slightly. But Cecily wasn't looking at him—she was looking around at the familiar sight of her village—at its

houses, the shop signs, the babbling brooks, the flowerpots filled with seasonal flowers, the children playing... It was almost as if her gaze was searching for something.

But Cain placed his hands on Cecily's shoulders and shook her slightly, cutting off her train of thought.

"Isn't it obvious? You probably chose to come back to see me, to fulfill the promise we made ten years ago."

I came here to meet Cain? To marry him?

"No," Cecily said, after a pause, "that's not it." She shook her head. "I know that no one told me that you were coming back. I didn't know you were coming home until the moment you arrived. Right?" As Cecily racked her brains, Cain silently looked on. "That's not all. I'm only sixteen. I was meant to be traveling the world until I turned seventeen. So why am I back here one year early?"

In the back of her mind, something was telling her that she had come here to do something important.

Cecily thought back on the days preceding her return. She had been discussing something with Greta. Charlotte had said she'd come along, but had been worried that her presence might cause some trouble...

"Enough worrying already! Come on, let's get going, Cecily," Cain said. His hands gripped her shoulders more tightly. She winced in pain, and he quickly removed them. "S-Sorry," he added. "It's just that you're acting weird! Here we are, reunited at last, and you go on about stuff you don't need to worry about."

Cecily's heart twinged with pain as she saw Cain's unhappy expression.

"I'm sorry," she said, as she held her shoulders. "But Cain, I really get the feeling I'm forgetting something important."

"You're not," he said curtly. Clicking his tongue in annoyance, he took Cecily's hand and began walking briskly. The force of his pull caused Cecily's heart to twinge. She was scared of him.

Wait, scared of Cain? But why should I be?

Cain was her first-ever boyfriend. He was her precious lover, whom she had promised to marry.

He shouldn't be scary—he should be the person she felt most

safe and comfortable around.

"Forget it. Let's go home. To your house, Cecily," Cain said. He seemed tired for some reason.

"Cain, are you angry at me?"

"I'm not. I'm just a bit...worried about your condition."

Cecily wasn't sure if this comment came from a place of kindness or spite, but in the end, she followed him all the way back home.

Greta had headed out this morning, but Sewell should still be at home. Cecily's father had been a bit out of sorts since fainting last night.

I'll ask dad what he knows.

Cecily remembered that she had discussed something with Greta before leaving for the village, but she also had the faint recollection that she had talked to Sewell about something too.

Why can't I remember? It wasn't that long ago and they're my own memories, so why is my mind so foggy?

Cecily grew more frustrated the more she thought on it. She let out a sigh, but in the next moment had bumped into Cain's back. Her nose throbbed.

"Ow... Hm, Cain?"

She peered in front of him to see the reason he had stopped so suddenly, and noticed Zeke standing in front of the door to her home.

Lost in her thoughts, Cecily had been simply looking at the ground as she walked, and hadn't noticed him. Shock ran through her body—she immediately looked away from Zeke to glance at Cain.

"Why, if it isn't Mr. Knight. What're you doing in front of the Rampses' house? You're acting like a stalker if you ask me," Cain said in a mocking tone, smiling wryly.

Zeke replied, standing there without moving a muscle. "I was waiting for you to come back."

Cain let out a noise of disinterest as he looked up at Zeke. "My, you look tired. Did you not catch a wink last night?"

"There's no reason for you to be worrying about me."

Cain's comment had hit the mark, but Zeke had no obligation to

explain himself, so he evaded the question.

When Charlotte had asked about Zeke this morning, Alphonse had lied. In truth, Zeke hadn't returned to his room all night. After leaving the assembly hall, Zeke had headed to the outskirts of the village and spent the whole night swinging his blade.

This couldn't even remotely have been called training—he was merely punishing his muscles. If he hadn't focused all his efforts on moving his body, he wouldn't have been able to keep his cool.

"I hear you're quite the genius, Cain."

"Now this makes my skin crawl. Have you decided to shower me with praise, then?"

Zeke shook his head. "I was told that the love potion has no antidote. However..." He paused. "I expect someone like yourself would be able to make one."

"Aha, I see," Cain replied. "You are quite the earnest one, Mr. Knight. So that's what brings you waltzing up to Cecily's door."

"If you so wish it, I shall get on my knees and beg," Zeke said, refusing to budge, an insolent air about him.

Cain turned around to look at Cecily, who was standing behind him. The pair of them were holding hands as they stared at one another, and Zeke bit his lip in frustration.

"I wouldn't mind watching you grovel in the dirt, but unfortunately, the love potion has no antidote."

"What did you say?" Zeke was in utter shock. Cain, on the other hand, cackled with a voice full of malice.

"Didn't you hear the witches of the village talk about me? My magic is so powerful that I spent the last ten years learning how to control it. And you see, I poured every last drop of my magical powers into the love potion I gave to Cecily. It's not something that will simply wear off after a few days, or even a few months."

A deep crease cut through Zeke's brow as he listened to Cain yammer on.

"How dare you...? Enough with the jokes."

Cecily could only watch as the pair continued their exchange—something was off.

What's happening?

Cecily placed a hand to her ear. Yes, her ears were working fine.

So why is it that I can't properly hear what they're saying?

It was strange. Every time either of them said something, their words lacked form or shape. Before Cecily could understand what they'd said, the words had already flitted out of her reach.

It scared her. The fact that this could be happening filled her with dread. Fear made her words die in her throat. All she could do was stand in silence and let the conversation she couldn't properly understand wash over her.

"That's not all. Once it eventually wears off on its own accord, I can simply get Cecily to drink another one. That way, she'll love me for the rest of my life."

"You absolute cur... Are you out of your mind?"

"Not at all. I just love Cecily."

Cecily was able to hear the last thing Cain said—he said he loved her. Cecily's cheeks flushed by impulse. She couldn't help it. Anyone would be happy if the one they loved said they loved them in return. Or at least, that was how it should've been.

However, when she looked up, Zeke came into sight. Zeke's face was twisted in pain, as if he had been betrayed, but when he caught Cecily's eye he immediately looked away.





Cecily didn't understand why.

Why did he look so pained when he looked at me?

She could have understood if his expression had been one of exasperation. After all, it was the height of brazenness to say such sweet nothings to one's lover in front of someone else.

However, Zeke's expression clearly contained pain. Just like yesterday. He had truly looked full of pain when he left the party last night. To Cecily, it looked like he was on the verge of tears. She had been unable to chase after him when he had walked off—and the reason for that was that Cecily had been the one who had caused him such pain.

Cecily had protected Cain, and that had pained Zeke.

But why?

"What's with that guy? Seriously. He's been bugging us ever since yesterday. A normal human should hurry up and just leave our village," Cain spat with a disgruntled expression.

Cecily had been deep in thought, but when she came to her senses, Zeke was no longer there. His argument with Cain had come to an end, and he had disappeared off somewhere.

"Cecily," Cain said, as he quickly took her hand and drew her close. He placed his delicate fingers upon Cecily's chin. This clumsy action drew Cecily out of her daydream and pulled her back into reality.

Cecily's eyes opened wide in shock as she realized what Cain was about to do.

"Stop!"

Her movements borne from reflex, Cecily thrust Cain back, using his shoulders.

She hadn't pushed very hard, but Cain lost his balance, and his shoulder collided with the doors of a small gate.

As soon as she saw the sadness spread across his face, pain stabbed her in the chest. She might have been surprised, but she had done a cruel thing to Cain. She needed to apologize right away.

"I-I'm sorry, Cain! I..."

However, a good reason wouldn't come to her lips. Cain gave a small smile as Cecily simply flapped her lips in confusion.

"Hey, it's fine. We all have days when we're not in the mood, right?"

Cain said this, but perhaps his feelings had actually been hurt, for he turned on his heel and began to walk away.

"Cain, where are you going?"

"I remembered I had something I needed to take care of. I'll be back by evening."

The stiff words that came out of his mouth were a poorly told lie. After all, it was Cain who had proposed their daylong walk around the village.

Left alone, Cecily was unable to move for a while. Eventually, she tottered back into her home. She climbed the stairs and entered her bedroom. With uncertain feet, she walked over to her bed and slumped down upon it.

She couldn't help but ponder her situation.

"Why...?"

Cecily and Cain were lovers. It was only natural for them to hug and kiss. It was cruel of her to push Cain away without reason. She needed to chase after him and apologize. If she did so, she was certain he would smile at her. Then they would kiss and make up as if nothing had happened at all.

These thoughts passed through her mind, yet her feet refused to move.

"What's wrong with me?"

Cecily began to shake all over.

Was it true that she hadn't forgotten something important? For some reason, she couldn't shake off the feeling that she must have. The problem was that she had no way of finding out what it was. Cecily tried to remember once again, but her head started to hurt. She let out a groan.

She didn't want to think of anything. She mustn't think of anything.

But Cecily wasn't even sure why she even felt that way.

What happened last night? What am I suffering from?

All of a sudden, a noise outside her door caused her to flinch.

Someone was knocking. Maybe Cain had come back.

Or maybe it's Sir Zeke...

As this possibility crossed her mind, Cecily found herself rushing to the door.

"Cecily?"

"Oh... It's you, dad," Cecily said quietly, all the energy gone from her voice.

Standing at the door was neither Cain nor Zeke, but her father Sewell.

"You're back, then. Where's Cain?"

Noticing his daughter wasn't answering him, he asked another question.

"Mind if I come in?"

Cecily had no reason to say no. She nodded, and Sewell came padding in. Cecily offered a chair to her father. Unfortunately, Sewell still hadn't fully recovered after what had happened yesterday. The chair let out a groan as Sewell sat down. He began to speak with some awkwardness.

"L-Listen, Cecily. You want to, um, marry Cain, is that right?"

Cecily couldn't answer.

I always thought that I'd want to marry the person I fell in love with.

In the fairy tales that Cecily loved, the princess always married the prince in a grand wedding ceremony. Everyone in attendance applauded as they celebrated the union of the happy couple. It was a given that these stories would reach this happy end.

Naturally, Cecily had always dreamt of such a beautiful tale for herself. Because of these stories, she was perhaps rather keen to get married herself.

Yet for some reason, an answer wouldn't come to her lips.

"Cecily, your daddy wants you to be the happiest person in the entire world. Which is why, you see, if you, Cecily, if you're serious about this—"

However, his words were cut off.

"Dad, I need to ask you something. What have I been doing this past year?"

Sewell didn't show a trace of discomfort. He gave a relaxed smile.

"Why, you told me with such joy what you were doing this past year just two days ago!"

"Can you repeat it for me?"

"Huh?"

"I want to hear what I told you from your mouth. You don't mind, do you?"

Sewell presumed his daughter just wanted to be coddled and to spend time with her father. He happily agreed.

"Of course. Let me relate to you what you told me, Cecily."

And so Sewell retold Cecily's story.

It was a tale that traced Cecily's past, relayed in Sewell's gentle voice. As Cecily listened, she felt her heart grow calmer. That uncomfortable frustration began to lessen, if only slightly.

Yet, for some reason, it felt as though something were missing.

That's right...

Two days ago, when Cecily had been eating Sewell's lovingly made meatballs... When she'd been telling Sewell about the past year... She had felt something.

I felt...sad. Lonely. I'm certain of it.

That emotion was seared deep into her chest.

She didn't know where that sadness had come from. When she tried to remember it, her head hurt. It was if someone was forbidding her from remembering.

"And so, you asked your good friends Lottie and Alphonse to come home to the witch village with you. I was so happy to see you again, after this long year."

Looking up at her beaming father, Cecily felt a pang of guilt. However, she stood up, shaking off those vestiges of hesitation.

"Dad, I really am sorry, but I need to head out."

Sewell's eyes widened in surprise. Outside, the sky was dyed in a deep orange hue.

"Now? But it's already evening."

"I'm just popping over to Marjorika's house. There's something I need to talk to Lady Lottie about."

Cecily told this slight white lie, due to the premonition that she

ought not to mention Zeke's name.

"Is that right? Well, you hurry back home as soon as you're done, okay?"

"You got it. After all, I'm looking forward to another one of your delicious homemade dishes!" Cecily said with a smile, before heading out.

Marjorika's house was always unlocked, as there were no thieves in the witch village. The doors of the house always remained open to anyone who needed Marjorika, whether it be a child who had run away from home after arguing with their parents or, conversely, parents who had run away from home after their children had yelled at them.

Her domicile was large and could house many people at once. Cecily had even sought refuge there once, when she was very young.

"Granny Marjorika, it's me. I'm coming in."

There was no reply, but Cecily entered anyway.

Was everyone out? Cecily had the feeling she'd heard a noise from one of the rooms on the first floor, but her destination was the second floor.

The rule is that guests sleep on the second floor.

Cecily turned towards the staircase, and had just grabbed the banister when she remembered something important.

I don't know what room Sir Zeke is staying in!

At this rate, her only option was to knock at each door and hope she found him.

As her head drooped in disappointment, she heard a whispering in the corner of her mind. It was a voice she knew well.

"He's in...the room in the corner, on the right..."

How did she know this? There was no way that she should have this information. Yet, riding this fresh wave of certainty, Cecily headed to the right after reaching the top of the stairs. She clenched her first, mustered up her courage, and knocked on the door.

"Hello, Sir Zeke? You're there...aren't you?"

There was no response. But she could hear movement from within the room.

Cecily waited, but there was no reply from Zeke. Yet she was certain he was inside.

"You are there, right? Excuse me, I'm coming in."

The only rooms that had locks were the bathroom and the facilities. Fortunately for Cecily, this meant that she could enter the room without being stopped.

And just as she thought, Zeke was there.

He was facing away from the door. What looked like his travel case had been flipped upside down, and he was rifling through its contents.

Nervousness stiffened Cecily's throat, but she swallowed it down.

He and I...know one another, don't we?

Yes, she had memories of him. Even though her memories of Zeke seemed as if they lay behind clouded glass, unlike her memories of meeting Charlotte, she was certain she knew him.

They had traveled here together, so they mustn't be on bad terms. All the same, Cecily could feel an invisible wall between her and Zeke.

Zeke was single-mindedly moving his belongings into a leather travel bag.

"Um, why are you packing your things?"

"It doesn't matter," he replied. His curt reply caused Cecily to feel a rush of anxiety. A chill seized her heart at his cold response.

"If you need something, can you get it over with quickly? I need to prepare for my departure." Perhaps Zeke had noticed the fear that had swept over Cecily, for he let out a tired sigh. "I'm sorry, I understand I am being difficult. It would help if you could leave me alone."

"Yes, but I..."

Cecily had so, so much she wanted to ask Zeke. However, now that she was in front of the man himself, the words wouldn't come out of her throat. Zeke glanced over at Cecily, who was unable to speak.

"We love one another, you know that?" he said, his words barely audible. However, Cecily heard him. She froze up, and Zeke smiled wryly at her. It was a pained smile that she could hardly bear to look

at. “Although I doubt you believe me.”

“You’re right,” Cecily said, with a nod. Her lover was Cain—that was a fact.

But he just said we love each other.

He hadn’t said “we used to love each other.” He had said it as if to imply that they loved each other, even now.

“You’re kind, Cecily. That’s the reason why you’re still worrying about me, even under the effects of that potion.”

Zeke whispered something as he stood. His bag was on his back. It seemed like he wasn’t lying about leaving. A troubled expression came over his face as he noticed that Cecily wasn’t budging from the doorway.

“Please leave me. It would be painful for you to be hugged by a man you barely know, wouldn’t it?”

“I...”

Cecily ventured a word, but Zeke looked away. Even his profile was full of pain. As soon as she saw his expression, a stab of pain shot through Cecily’s gut.

“If you won’t move, then I’ll take my leave. Please let me pass.”

“Sir Zeke...”

There it is again.

Zeke looked as if the act of her calling his name had hurt him even more. Cecily’s own heart couldn’t bear it any longer, so she finally took a step backwards.

Zeke passed her, then stopped and spoke in a quiet voice. “No matter what I tell you right now, I know you’ll only view me with suspicion. However, allow me to say one thing.”

It was but for a moment, but his hazel eyes looked at Cecily.

A single glance into them told Cecily that Zeke was simply putting up a cold front. Doing so was the only way he could keep a lid on his emotions.

“I won’t give you up to anyone. I promise this.”

Zeke stepped out of the room, leaving behind Cecily, who had no reply.

Side Story: Detective Lottie Is on the Case, Part 2

"All right then. Now that our cat-hunt is over, I think we should return to the Cain case."

Lottie had finally recovered from her shock at having encountered not one, but two talking cats. The detective and her assistant had encountered a few distractions throughout the day, but now the task at hand was solving the Cain issue. She called for her assistant and began walking down one of the little village's streets.

"I suppose they must be in the flower field by now, huh?" said Alphonse.

It was already late in the day, and the skies were tinged with orange.

"Yes, I think it is quite probable, Alphonse's loins. You've visited the flower field already, haven't you?"

Lottie decided to hold her tongue and refrain from mentioning that he had abandoned his guard duties yesterday.

The plan had been to visit the flower field with Cecily, but Cain's unexpected return had derailed that. Judging by how Cecily was acting, Lottie expected that she would probably refuse an invitation to go, saying something like "I can't leave Cain's side."

Did a love potion cause your heart to become more closed off to others, perhaps? Lottie imagined that if Cecily announced that she and Cain were going on a trip together, for example, Cecily probably wouldn't allow Lottie to come along.

When Cecily had looked at Cain earlier, Lottie had noticed a trace of remorse in her expression. Lottie didn't mind that her friend felt bad for declining her earlier invitation, but she wouldn't stand by and do nothing while that same friend's very will was being distorted in this way.

Not only that...Cecily looked far happier when she was with Zeke.

Lottie had never been in love, but when she saw Cecily talking to Zeke or simply being by Zeke's side, she looked to Lottie like the most beautiful and adorable person in the world.

"Yeah, it was a nice place," Alphonse replied. "There're all sorts of different flowers growing there."

"Oh, is that right?" Lottie said curtly, naturally unbothered that she hadn't been able to go herself. She changed the subject. "Alphonse's loins," she said, "here we are in a village full of women, yet you don't seem as excited as I thought you'd be. Normally, you'd flit about and play around with any woman you could, and end up with a surplus of long-distance girlfriends."

This was Alphonse they were talking about, after all—he was easy on the eyes, had a suave personality, and flirtatious lines poured easily from his lips. Of course Lottie was happy that no one had fallen victim to him here, but the rare sight of him being so reserved made her feel uncomfortable.

"It sounds so bad when you put it like that," Alphonse grumbled in reply. For some reason, Lottie's comment appeared to have gotten to him. "The reason is that I'm your personal guard right now."

"Or so you say. Don't you remember how often you shirked your duties back in the Snowflower Palace?"

"I never shirk my guard duty! Not at all."

"Huh? You don't?"

Lottie thought hard on her time back in the palace and began to realize that perhaps what Alphonse was saying was right. Zeke had said before that Alphonse often abandoned the Celestial Knight Brigade's training sessions, but he'd also mentioned that Alphonse had never once failed to attend to his duties as Lottie's guard.

Most likely, this was because Alphonse knew that if the king got wind of what he was up to, he would be in big trouble. No, hold on—refusing to attend training was already an inexcusable act for a knight in charge of protecting his nation...

Oh, whatever, Lottie thought, choosing to give up on the thought. Right now, the Cecily and Cain issue was more important than Alphonse.

"Hold on a sec..."

Alphonse came to a sudden stop. Following the line of his gaze, Lottie's own eyes began to glitter when she saw Cain walking by himself by the side of the road.

"That's Cain's loins over there. Let's tail him."

Lottie was a bit puzzled as to where Cecily was, but this was the perfect chance to pursue this lead.

"My lady, hold it! He'll notice you in an instant if you get that close," Alphonse said. He looked over at Cain, and thanks to his skills as vice-captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade, even from afar, he got a good read on Cain. He noticed that the other man's stride was tinged with undisguised rage. Cain was usually as on guard as a cat, but right now, with his mind elsewhere, it seemed he might not notice being tracked by the little detective. "Actually, forget it. It looks safe. Let's keep on like this."

"Right," Lottie said, with a serious nod. The pair moved from pillar to wall to tree, hiding behind each object as they followed Cain.

"It looks like he's heading towards Granny Marjorika's house," Lottie commented.

Perhaps it would have been more fitting to call Marjorika's house a manor, for it was a stunning building. Lottie and the others had stayed there last night, and Marjorika had greeted them all with a smile, happy to meet so many of Cecily's friends.

Cain entered the building without even turning around. After waiting until the door shut, Alphonse turned to Lottie, hand cupping his chin in thought.

"What's the plan?" he asked.

"We sneak inside too, naturally. Nothing is impossible for Detective Lottie!"

"Impossible" wasn't really a relevant descriptor here, however—the doors in Marjorika's home were all unlocked, so it would be an easy task.

"My lady, may I make an observation?"

"What?"

"You're bright red. Are you perhaps embarrassed to be using the cutesy nickname of 'Lottie,' as someone of your station?"

Lottie—or the fourteen-year-old Princess Charlotte—was struck dumb by Alphonse's comment. It had hit the mark.

"O-Of course not! Enough of this—let's focus on our task."

Having reprimanded Alphonse, she swiftly pulled the front door ajar. Peeping through the crack, she caught sight of Cain heading into the building's reception room. Crawling on all fours, she crept inside and up to the inner door, and placed her ear upon it.

"I read this in a book," she said to Alphonse, who was crouching nearby. "Apparently, you can hear into another room by placing your ear on a door or wall."

"Talk about handy."

"Sorry for asking you to meet so suddenly," said a voice from inside. It was Cain. His voice was loud enough that Alphonse, whose ear wasn't placed upon the door or wall, could hear it perfectly well.

"My lady?" said Alphonse.

"Say nothing," Lottie replied.

Lottie drew away from the door.

"Doing this is kinda exciting, huh?" Alphonse piped up again.

"Take this seriously!" Lottie said, before pausing. "Though I must agree with you."

Eavesdropping, as it were, brought with it a guilty rush.

"Dear me, all you youngsters coming to me today," came the other voice. It was Greta.

"Auntie, I need to ask you something."

"Say that word again, and I shall smack you."

"...Madam Greta. Beautiful, youthful, Madam Greta, whose powers are unmatched in this village...I have a question."

"Fire away."

"Thank you. I, um... I made the love potion by following the recipe to the letter. I used the right selection of medicinal herbs, the fresh blood of an amorous toad, the tail of a pink lizard, lake water that had been blessed by the full moon's glow, one thousand of my hairs—from tip to root, naturally—my own fresh blood... I concocted it exactly as I should, and included all the correct ingredients. So why's Cecily so focused on *him* instead of me?"

Charlotte was listening seriously, but a wave of cold sweat passed

over her. This was the first time she'd heard what a love potion required, and it sounded absolutely disgusting. Even a lifetime of romance would be soured after learning the contents of what you'd just drunk.

"So tell me," Cain went on, "where did I go wrong?"

"You didn't. When I saw the love potion in the assembly hall, I was impressed with how wonderfully it came out. You were confident in your creation too, weren't you?"

"Then why?! Why isn't Cecily in love with me?!"

Charlotte shuddered in fear as Cain raised his voice in anger. Alphonse, who was sitting cross-legged nearby, glanced over at Charlotte—as if to tell her she had nothing to fear. His confident gaze calmed Charlotte's racing heart a little.

"I'm sorry for shouting," Charlotte heard Cain say, from the other side of the door. "Au—Madam Greta, you made a love potion for Sewell, didn't you? Was the way he reacted different than Cecily?"

"I'm not sure if my darling's case is a decent comparison, I'm afraid. My darling was in love with me before I even gave him the love potion. Tee hee."

Cain paused. "Are you saying that if Cecily wasn't in love with me to begin with, there was no point in giving her the love potion?"

"I didn't say that there was no point. However, while you've been standing by worrying, it seems that Zeke has been making some plans of his own."

"What's that supposed to mean?" A trace of doubt had trickled into Cain's words.

"You see, to try and win back Cecily's heart, Zeke has gone off in order to find a certain mythical spring. I expect he's finished packing and has headed off already."

"Hold on a second... You're kidding?" Cain laughed as if this were all a joke, but his laugh soon petered out. "Let me get this straight," he said. "By 'a certain mythical spring,' you mean the spring deep in the mountains where the fairy king is said to live? He intends to retrieve the legendary water that's supposed to heal any and all ailment? That's just a fairy tale—literally! You're telling me he believed that cock-and-bull story? For real?"

"I did tell him that it was merely a legend, but Zeke was willing to accept it. He probably forced himself to believe it."

Silence filled the room for several moments.

"Is that right? Well, I suppose this is out of my hands. I'll be taking my leave now."

"Oh no!"

Charlotte panicked. He was taking his leave way too fast!

At this rate, Cain would discover them. If he noticed she had been eavesdropping on him, there was no telling what that hateful man would say.

Unfortunately, there was nowhere to hide in the corridor. While Charlotte was panicking about what to do, Alphonse spoke.

"You may hit me as much as you like later, Your Royal Highness."

"Whuh?!"

Charlotte didn't have time to say anything else. After letting out this ridiculous sound, she found that she had been scooped up in Alphonse's strong arms.

"I—" She was about to scream, but a large hand covered her mouth. In the next moment, Charlotte's world started to shake—Alphonse had started running.

Alphonse swiftly and silently opened the door to the room next door and slipped inside. She heard his shoes make a squeaking sound on the floor, but it went dark in the next moment as he held her close by the wall, out of sight.

He's standing right behind me.

Charlotte could feel the warmth of Alphonse's body, and his breath above her head. She held her own breath.

From outside, she heard a door open. Then, footsteps growing quieter. Cain had walked through the entrance hall and back outside.

Alphonse let out a sigh of relief, then gently removed himself from Charlotte's side.

"A-Alphonse, y-you..."

To have picked up a princess like a child! Wait, no—to have picked up *Charlotte*, a princess who had a phobia of men and then to clasp his hand over her mouth...!

Distancing himself from the shivering princess, Alphonse fell to

one knee with his head bowed low.

"My deepest apologies, Your Royal Highness. I will accept any punishment you deem acceptable."

Charlotte let out a confused sound. Alphonse's cool demeanor flustered her even more.

When the Celestial Knight Brigade had first been appointed to guard the Snowflower Palace and also to act as Charlotte's personal guards, various decisions had taken place between the two parties of the royal family and the knights.

One of these was that no one was permitted to lay even one finger upon Charlotte, their charge, apart from the most dire of situations.

However, Charlotte now realized that this had in fact been an emergency. There may not have been a direct threat to her life, but Alphonse had acted quickly to protect Charlotte's good name.

Yet these rational thoughts were completely overwhelmed by adrenaline—adrenaline caused by the realization that this was the first time someone of the opposite gender had held her since she had stopped being a child.

Well, there was the time just a few hours ago that he had stroked her head with his pinky—by the way, Lottie had been feeling really down in the dumps back then, so yes, that did count as a dire situation—but they had been much closer than that just a moment ago. So close that she could catch his scent, and he, hers.

Men were objects of fear for Charlotte. Lust personified. Wicked beings. Yet, she hadn't found Alphonse's fragrance, tinged with sweat, detestable.

"No," she said, eventually. "I will not hit you nor punish you. You saved me from a potentially horrible situation. I should be thanking you instead."

"You don't look very thankful to me..."

A vein was bulging on Charlotte's forehead. Her expression didn't look grateful either. However, this was merely a result of trying to hide the embarrassment bubbling within her.

Charlotte let out a huff and tossed her hair back. Then she let out a small gasp of surprise. There was Cecily, sitting by the wall.

"If it isn't Cecily! What are you doing here?"

"Lady Lottie..." Cecily said, looking up. She was hugging her knees to her chest.

It seemed like it wasn't just Charlotte and Alphonse who had been eavesdropping on Cain. Cecily must have been keeping quiet in here while listening to the conversation next door.

No, that wasn't all there was to it. Thinking back on what Cain had said, Charlotte lit upon another possibility. Cecily had been worried about Zeke. Despite the way the love potion was playing with her mind, she couldn't stop thinking of him, somewhere deep down.

If that was the case, there was something only Charlotte could do for her best friend.

"Cecily, you look pretty gloomy," Charlotte said jokingly, her tone bright. "I was so happy to see you looking so cheerful here back in your hometown, so it saddens me to see you like this." Charlotte gave Cecily, whose eyes were filled with an uncertain sadness, a smile. "Oh, yes—what did you do with your things in the end?"

"Huh?"

"Don't you remember? You said that you put that *valuable thing* in your travel bag to keep it safe. If you're going off to look for the captain's loins, it might be better to bring it with you, no? I expect it might help when the time comes."

Cecily's expression was unreadable. She seemed a little confused. Soon she stood up, wiped down her skirt, and left the room. Her footsteps eventually faded out of earshot.

Alphonse tilted his head in confusion, unsure what that was all supposed to mean.

"My lady, what's this 'valuable thing' you mentioned?"

"I can't tell you. Cecily made me promise to keep it a secret."

Charlotte gave a sigh, then slumped down to the ground and held her knees to her chest, just as Cecily had been doing.

Should she have gone with Cecily? It was true that it would be dangerous for even Zeke—captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade, lauded for his unparalleled strength, and gifted with countless medals—to be wandering around in unfamiliar mountains at night.

But something had stopped her. Charlotte had realized that Cecily was fighting something on her own—she knew her presence would only get in the way of those struggles.

"How was your little eavesdropping escapade, you two?"

"Eep!"

Charlotte bit her tongue in surprise at the sudden voice from the next room.

"W-We're so sorry! We can explain!"

"Oh, there's no need to apologize. You were concerned for my little Cecily, right?"

Charlotte felt a pang of sadness at Greta's relaxed tone.

"Mrs. Greta...aren't you worried about Cecily?"

"That I am. But Cecily's not a weak girl."

Charlotte thought the same. But she wasn't strong enough to be as confident in Cecily as Greta was.

"I sent Rolo to follow her, so nothing terrible should happen," Greta said. "Now then, I should return home to my darling."

Charlotte heard her leave. Then, as she remained there on the cold floor, Alphonse called out to her.

"How about some tea? I'll pour some for you."

"Alphonse's loins... I really am weak, aren't I?" Charlotte's emerald eyes were swimming with tears, and not just from the pain of biting her tongue. "I wanted to help Cecily, but I couldn't do a thing."

Alphonse shook his head. "I don't think so."

"I don't need your sympathy!" Charlotte cried. Sometimes she wanted to be consoled, but at others, she wanted to be left alone.

Making use of a stove in the room, Alphonse began to prepare some tea. As he did so, he said, "To me, it looked like some color had returned to Cecy's face, you know?"

His voice was warm and optimistic.

Chapter 5: The One Who Truly Stole My Heart

"Sir Zeke!"

It was dark. As she wandered alone across the mountainside, Cecily continued to call his name.

"Sir Zeke, where are you? Please answer me!"

Cecily wasn't sure how long she had been searching now—two hours, maybe? At any rate, there had been no trace of Zeke—she hadn't found the slightest clue that might tell her where he was.

The sun had long set. Up in the wooded mountains, it got both dark and cold quickly.

Maybe he's headed back to the royal capital.

Cecily couldn't help but wish for this. That would be far preferable to the other possibility.

According to Greta, Zeke was in search of a mythical spring that was said only to exist in legends. It was Greta who had led Cecily to overhear the conversation with Cain. Cecily had been in Marjorika's house and had let Zeke leave before eventually heading down to the first floor.

Greta had come out of the reception room and found the despondent Cecily there. Her mother had said, "Something interesting's going to happen in just a moment, so wait in this room and keep your ears open," before forcing Cecily to wait without a clue as to what was going on.

Eventually, Cain had showed up and Cecily had listened to their conversation from the next room with bated breath. Listening was all she could do.

The legendary spring where the fairy king is said to live...

Everyone who had grown up in the witch village had gone out looking for this spring at least once. Even Cecily had slipped out of

the village to look for it in her childhood. Yet no one had ever found it.

The village itself may have been hidden, but the mountain wasn't so large that the average traveler would meet with much danger. Not only that, travelers or merchants used the safer, paved path down in the lower parts of the mountain. Suffice to say, this wasn't the sort of place where myths slept.

In other words, when everyone grew up, they came to understand that this spring just didn't exist. They would watch the children of the village get excited about it and merely reminisce on the times when they themselves went out looking for it.

There was no way Zeke would seriously have gone out looking for something like that.

But here Cecily was, in the mountains, calling his name.

Cecily wasn't well versed in the mountains herself. They may not have been particularly tall mountains, but there was the danger of bumping into magical beasts or dangerous animals.

Using her lantern as she continued her search, she felt fear creep into her heart as she wandered this area that she was unfamiliar with. Rustling sounds from the bushes caused her to jump in fright. Her legs were growing tired.

Maybe I should head back soon...

Even if Zeke wasn't headed back to the royal capital, there was a chance that he'd given up and headed back to Marjorika's. Apparently he hadn't slept at all last night—it was unlikely he would be able to continue dragging around an exhausted body.

It was just as Cecily was turning to head back that she noticed something. There, on the branch of a low tree, was a piece of fabric. She took it in her hand and held it up to the light. It was a blue scrap of high-quality fabric.

It looked a lot like the fabric of the uniform Zeke had been wearing.

"No..."

Peering behind the tree that the fabric had been hanging from, she noticed a steep slope where many trees had fallen down. It looked like a heavy storm had toppled them.

Did Sir Zeke fall down this slope?

Cecily felt the blood drain from her face.

If he had fallen down this slope, then there was a chance he had injured himself on the broken branches and tree trunks. If he had landed badly, he could even have died.

Panic engulfing her, Cecily raised her lantern high, but the light didn't travel far. She wouldn't be able to see Zeke, even if he was halfway down the slope.

"I'll head down and make sure," she said to herself.

The way would be a bit long, but if she followed the trees nearby, she could make her way safely to the bottom.

Cecily put her strength into all four of her limbs as she headed down a route that was barely a path. One of her hands was carrying the lantern as well, so it wasn't an easy descent.

Pain ran through her hand every now and then—she had probably caught her palm on something as she used the trees to keep herself steady. But she couldn't waste time worrying about such trifling discomfort.

After a half hour or so, Cecily finally came to the clearing at the bottom of the slope.

Maybe it was just by chance, but there was a small spring near where she emerged. No—it was less a spring and more of a pond or even a big puddle.

But this was no time to ponder the best descriptor for the pond—for next to it lay Zeke.

Holding her breath, Cecily rushed to his side.

"You're all beaten up..."

As Cecily had expected, he must have slipped in the dark. Here he was at the bottom of the slope, face up and unconscious. His clothes were covered in mud and dirt as well as stained with blood.

Feeling a rush of emotion—a mix of relief and pain—Cecily wiped away the tears that started to well up. This was no time to cry. Cecily was the only one who could help him.

Cecily placed the lantern upon a flat boulder and opened up Zeke's shirt to see if he was injured.

One small blessing was that Zeke didn't seem to have broken any

bones. She wasn't sure if he had hit his head on the way down—at least, there didn't seem to be any blood there.

Then, at the sight of the bag which she had placed near Zeke, she remembered something.

"That's right. Lady Charlotte mentioned something, didn't she..."

Charlotte had said Cecily had something in her bag that might help when the time came. Before heading out to look for Zeke, Cecily had gone to fetch the bag from her room. Prioritizing speed, she hadn't had the time to organize her things and had simply taken it without even opening it. Maybe that had been a mistake.

Cecily opened her bag and began rummaging inside it. Her fingers encountered the soft sensation of fabric. Pulling it out, she noticed it was a handkerchief.

"I suppose I can use this to wrap one of his wounds."

Hold on—she knew she had proper bandages, or something more suitable.

With this thought in mind, Cecily brought the lantern closer to her bag to get a better look inside, but then noticed that there was a design on the handkerchief.

And there's something written on it...

She peered closer, wondering what it could be. One word was illuminated in the flickering lantern light.

Zeke

The handkerchief was embroidered. On it was a name sewn in strong, blue thread. Then, in a combination of silver and blue threads, there was a wyvern taking flight.

Each stitch must have been threaded with such care—Cecily could tell simply by glancing at it. She stroked it softly, as if confirming something. She couldn't help but continue to stroke it, again and again.

"Ah..."

Plip.

"Ahh..."

Tears trickled down Cecily's smooth cheeks and landed on her

hands.

I was the one...who embroidered this.

Cecily had embroidered this handkerchief. She knew that now—by look and by feel. It wasn't perfect work by any means, but she remembered that she had worked so hard and had spent a lot of time threading it.

Wiping her tears away, Cecily then slapped her cheeks to bring herself back to her senses.

There were things to do before she could cry. First, she needed to tend to Zeke's wounds. Rifling through her bag, Cecily found a first aid box and pulled it out.

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The light of a little oil lamp flickered on a mountain enveloped by darkness. In its glow, Cecily let out a sigh and wiped her brow.

"That's done. Next..."

"Ngh..."

Cecily's eyes darted back to Zeke. As he lay atop his white shirt, he had opened his eyes.

"Sir Zeke! You're awake!"

Cecily had called out to him with a beaming smile, but it appeared that Zeke was still a bit out of it.

"I..."

Zeke spoke, but his voice was so croaky and quiet that Cecily couldn't hear him.

He slowly pulled himself upright, and Cecily helped him sit up. She opened the canteen she'd brought with her and held it out to him hesitantly.

"Would you like some water?"

"...Thanks," Zeke said with a small nod before taking the canteen. He took a slow draft from it. Cecily sighed with relief to see his throat successfully taking in the water.

"Does it hurt anywhere? Did you hit your head?"

"I'm okay. I didn't hit my head, no."

Zeke seemed lucid. *What a relief.*

Cecily pushed Zeke back down to the ground. It was getting cold, and he seemed all right, so Cecily buttoned his shirt back up and laid a blanket over him.

She had finished tending to his larger wounds. Now, she washed his cuts and scratches with water, then applied ointments to them before bandaging them up.

The medicines she was using had all been brought for the journey. Cecily might still have had a long way to go as a witch, but she was sure they should work.

Zeke watched Cecily busily take care of him, following her with his eyes. Then, in the next moment, he began to mutter.

"I told you, fairy king. I just want an antidote to the love potion... So stop showing me these illusions of her..."





"Excuse me?"

Did he just say "fairy king"? Did he really not hit his head?

From what Cecily had seen of Zeke, he didn't seem to be badly injured—he was mostly suffering from a lack of sleep and physical exhaustion. It was this tiredness that had caused him to lose his footing in the dark.

"There's no way Cecily's out here by my side right now. Wait... Am I dead? And being blessed with a happy dream?" Zeke had begun muttering some nonsense to himself while Cecily was busy tending to him and tidying her belongings. "Of course... This is a dream. If the last thing I see is Cecily, then it's not been a bad life..."

"Um..."

Cecily tried to speak up to tell him he was wrong, but realized she shouldn't. Zeke was evidently not in his right mind. If he was so tired that he was talking nonsense, it would be best not to say anything that would cause him unnecessary stress.

"Yes, this is a dream, Sir Zeke. You're in the middle of a dream."

"No... This isn't a dream."

Cecily froze in shock. How had he come to that realization so quickly?

Zeke went on in a quiet voice that was full of exhaustion.

"Cecily wouldn't call me that. She wouldn't talk to me so politely."

Zeke's voice was full of resignation. He bit his lower lip, then looked at Cecily with suspicion.

"Why are you here?"

"Mom told me you left, so I came chasing after you. I thought perhaps you might get lost on the mountain."

"I'm fine. So hurry back." *To Cain*, Zeke thought, but did not say.

However, Cecily wasn't going to simply do what Zeke told her.

"Sir Zeke, I have a request. Give me your hair and blood."

"My hair? And my...blood?"

Zeke's eyes creased in confusion, but Cecily bravely spoke what was on her mind.

"I want to make a love potion."

Zeke's mouth fell open.

"What did you say?"

Cecily placed her hand upon her chest and explained. “If I drink a love potion made from your hair and blood, then I should fall in love with you. If I do that, then it might counteract the effects of the love potion Cain made.”

Zeke was stunned into silence.

“The way everyone’s been acting has made me sure of it. Cain slipped me a love potion, correct? In that case, if I drink another one —”

“Is this some kind of joke?” Zeke said, his mouth twisting into a grimace.

“I’m not playing around!” Cecily said, refusing to budge. Zeke must have noticed that Cecily was serious, for he merely looked at her with a frown. He spoke again after a short silence.

“Please, don’t even suggest such nonsense.” These cold words, a rejection of Cecily’s wishes, echoed through the night air. “You love Cain, right? Drinking another love potion will solve nothing. Do you want your heart to simply be under the control of a potion your whole life?”

Zeke’s voice was cold, and his gaze was like icy daggers.

“I...”

As Cecily fell quiet, Zeke continued, as if he had just been proved right.

“You love Cain, don’t you?” he repeated.

“I...do not!” Cecily’s cry rang out. “I don’t, I don’t, I *don’t*! I *don’t* love him!”

“Cecily?”

Zeke looked concerned. The hand that he reflexively held out to her was pulled back slowly in the next moment. He wasn’t sure if he should touch Cecily. After all—she had drunk a love potion.

But Cecily wanted Zeke to touch her, even if she had to force him. However, she couldn’t put this emotion into words. All she could do was force out the things she wanted to say, as if rage had taken over her senses.

“The reason this hurts so much isn’t because I love Cain! If I loved Cain, then my heart wouldn’t be in so much pain right now! If I could really leave you alone, then I would be back in the village

talking to Cain right now!”

Cecily spoke earnestly, her hand held upon her chest. Tears blurred her vision. As she let them fall, she spoke her thoughts.

“Every time I look at you, I can’t breathe. It’s like I want to cry. I don’t... I don’t think these emotions are fake.”

Zeke could only look at Cecily with bewilderment written across his face. And yet, deep within his hazel eyes lay hope. Which is why Cecily continued to speak, even as her words dared to fail her.

“It’s not...Cain.” The one in her heart was someone else. “It’s no one else. It’s you that I want to know more, Sir Zeke.”

Zeke touched Cecily’s cheek as she spoke with all her might. He rose again into a seated position. Cecily’s hand touched his broad chest of its own accord.

Zeke held his breath. His body felt hot, and Cecily felt almost as if she would melt into its warmth. She tugged up his head to face her, and they stared at each other.

“Are you sure, Cecily? At this rate...I won’t be able to resist kissing you.”

“...Then do it.”

The words had finally made their way to Cecily’s lips. After a moment of hesitation, those same lips were touched by Zeke’s.

Their lips were only together for a few seconds, but still, a hot shock passed over Cecily’s entire body.

“I knew it...”

A single tear fell from Cecily’s eye.

“I know these lips well, Zeke,” Cecily said, happy tears in her eyes.

Zeke’s own eyes widened in surprise and disbelief.

“Cecily, I...”

However, Cecily did not find out what he intended to say next, for his body gently toppled over.

Cecily rushed towards him to stop him from falling, but it was too late. He was already unconscious. His body weight almost pulled Cecily down too, but she called out again and again.

“Zeke? Zeke?! Are you okay?!”

His eyes were closed. There was no response from him.

"Zeke! Cecy!"

From afar came Alphonse's voice. There was a light there.

"We're over here, Sir Alphonse!" Cecily shouted with all her might, clasping Zeke close to her so that they would never be apart ever again.

Chapter 6: Cain’s Lie

The next morning, in Marjorika’s house...

Cecily had tended to Zeke all night since they had returned to the witch village, barely stopping to rest. In actuality, she had long since finished fixing up his wounds back on the mountain and Zeke was merely sleeping off his exhaustion, but she wanted to remain by his side.

After soaking a cloth in a bucket of fresh water, she wrung out the excess liquid and gently wiped his brow. She set the cloth back down, then returned to her seat by his bed and held her hands together in a praying motion.

Zeke... Open your eyes.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she said.

Although she heard the door open, no one answered. She turned around slowly, expecting to see Alphonse or someone else who was worried about Zeke—but it was Cain.

“Cain...”

“Cecily, you surprised me. I didn’t realize you slipped out of the village to save him.”

Cecily almost found herself apologizing, but kept quiet and simply stared back at Cain.

“But it’s fine now. You’re my girlfriend, aren’t you? So I’d prefer if you stopped tending to some other guy.”

Cain spoke as if berating a lover for their infidelity, but Cecily was not swayed in the slightest.

“I cannot. The only man I’ll tend to like this, now and forever, is Zeke.”

Cain’s thin lips trembled at Cecily’s blunt reply. He supposed that the effects of the love potion must have worn off. This must have been due to something stupid like “the power of love”—there was no

other explanation.

Although this had been the first love potion Cain had ever made in his life, he was a talented wizard, so he was certain it had been an effective concoction. And yet it'd only had middling effects on Cecily. Even when she'd been under its spell, the love that Cecily had felt for Cain had only amounted to the kind of love reserved for friends—a far cry from romantic love. Now that she was back in her right mind, Cecily was sure of it.

After all, I know what true love feels like.

The emotions she had felt due to the love potion were not the usual feelings of love that she was familiar with. That uncontrollable emotion of loving someone so much that you couldn't bear for them to leave your sight for even a moment... Having your heart race from excitement or happy embarrassment, every day being a rush of emotions, just being in pure bliss by their side... That was what Zeke, her love, meant to Cecily.

"Cecily... Has the love potion worn off, then?" Cain ventured.

"It seems so. My head is full of only Zeke. There's no space for anyone else."

It may have been a painful truth for Cain to hear, but Cecily bravely announced this indisputable fact.

"Cain, there is something I need to ask," she went on, changing the subject as she stood up. "I don't actually remember that promise we made. I remember we spoke in the flower field ten years ago, but it was so long ago that I can't exactly remember what happened. Did I actually promise to marry you?"

"You did. Of course you did," Cain replied. But his voice was quavering. "The love potion may have worn off, but that doesn't matter! You said that you would marry me back then. Do you really intend to break a promise?"

"I..."

In the next moment, there was a bang as the door slammed open.

"I've heard enough! I'm sorry to say, Cain's loins, that although you may be able to smooth-talk your way into tricking Cecily or the captain's loins, you have no chance of tricking me and my gray

matter! This I swear on my emerald-green eyes!”

“Lottie?!”

Cecily was almost lost for words at Charlotte’s sudden appearance, and how the girl had rattled off this spiel with no pause for breath. Behind Charlotte was Alphonse. The pair entered the room, and Charlotte continued in a conclusive manner.

“Cain’s loins. Your statement that Cecily agreed to marry you was a lie, was it not?”

Huh?

Barely believing Charlotte’s remark, Cecily looked over at Cain. There were signs of stress in his expression.

“Well now, my dear detective, what proof do you have of that?”

“A matter such as this isn’t even a worthy puzzle for a detective like myself,” Charlotte said, wagging her forefinger with a tutting sound. She even shook her head as if to express her complete disbelief. “We must first consider Cecily’s personality. Cecily here is a young maiden whose heart is absolutely obsessed with ideas of romance. If she had made such a romantic and heart-racing promise with any pair of loins, then I’m certain she would not forget it.”

“But our promise was ten years ago. It’s not a huge leap to imagine that she merely forgot.”

“I think not,” Charlotte said before producing a confident smirk. “A romantic maiden who would forget a promise like that is no maiden at all! Cecily would never forget such an important promise. It’s unthinkable!”

“My lady, your line of reasoning here seems a bit...forced to me.”

“Silence, assistant!” Charlotte snapped at Alphonse, who had dared to interrupt. “Now then, I’m quite ticked off that you would even dare to force my best friend to drink a love potion, so I’m not going to go easy on you in the next part of my deduction.”

Cain audibly gulped in the face of Charlotte, who was exuding an aura of danger.

“This hinges on an if—a *big* if, mind you. *If* Cecily had promised to marry you ten years ago...then the fact that she forgot that promise shows just how little you meant to her.”

Silence filled the room for several seconds.

“Whew... Now that’s gotta sting,” Alphonse muttered sympathetically.

This, perhaps, was the moment that time started to move for Cain. He pulled an awkward smile, and his head drooped in shame.

“Your methods are certainly cruel, Miss Detective.”

“Oh, I’m not done. After you were forgotten, and she found a lover when you didn’t, you did the most petty, uncool form of revenge you could by using a love potion. In situations like these, you’re supposed to sit silently by and just be happy for her! You’re meant to go home with your wedding cake and cry as you eat it all alone! That’s what loving someone really means!”

“L-Lady Lottie, I think you should leave it at that...” Alphonse said.

Charlotte’s verbal assault tore into Cain as if he were no more than a dirty rag. But he listened to every word, refusing to storm off or shy away from it.

“I’m uncool, huh...?”

“Yeah. Very. But as long as you’re aware of it, you can always try again. Life is long.”

Cain finally raised his head. Cecily felt she saw something melting away from his expression—something that had been haunting him, controlling him.

“Thanks, Miss Detective... I’ve seen the light thanks to you.”

“If that’s so, then I’ll take my leave without rubbing salt into the wound. A good day to you.”

“I think you rubbed quite a bit of salt in his wounds, you know...”

“Silence, assistant!”

And so the detective and her assistant left the room. The room fell quiet again as their busy conversation faded out of earshot. Cecily didn’t speak, while Cain bowed his head.

“Cecily, I really am sorry for tricking you. For lying to you.”

“Cain...”

“I won’t ask you to forgive me for slipping you the love potion and for lying about our promise. All I can tell you is how sorry I am.”

With his hands clenched into fists, Cain simply apologized over and over. Cecily shook her head at the regret filling his voice.

"Cain, I'm not going to tell you off about the love potion thing."

"Why not?"

"Because I tried to do the same thing as you."

"Huh? You did?" Cain gazed at Cecily with bewilderment.

Cecily felt more embarrassment in the retelling of what she'd tried to do than in the actual doing of it. Despite her flushed cheeks, though, she felt that she needed to tell him. About how she'd fallen in love at first sight, how a misunderstanding had caused her to become disillusioned with Zeke, how she'd tried to make a love potion, and how she'd planned to trick Zeke into drinking her concoction.

"Ultimately, I didn't actually end up making a love potion and Zeke drank it of his own will, but yeah. That's what happened to me. The end!"

It was way too embarrassing to give him every last detail, so Cecily finished her story there. Not only that, she still had a question for Cain.

"Cain, tell me... Why did you make me drink your love potion?"

"Well..." Cain said, smiling weakly. "It has to do with my ten years of training. It was tough—real tough. Every day I had to do this punishing training to control my magical powers, and each night I would sleep like a log due to how exhausted I was. Then I'd wake up and do it all over again. I barely ever felt happy that whole time."

"Cain..." Cecily couldn't help but say his name. So that was why he'd wanted to visit all their old haunts again yesterday. Cain seemed so fixated on the past, on those days when he'd been young, where every day was fun and easy, and spent without a care in the world. Maybe that was also why he hadn't wanted to hear about Cecily's life recently.

Cain paused for a little while before finally going on.

"To tell the truth, I don't think I really did love you all that much."

"Mm-hmm," Cecily said encouragingly.

Before Cain had started his training, in his eyes, Cecily had surely been just someone who was a little more special to him than others. Just like how Cecily loved romance, Cain had probably let himself idealize the memories he'd shared with that girl who was his age. All

he could do was cling to them to help him get through his everyday life.

"I think," said Cain, "I was just lonely."

Loneliness... This was an emotion that Cecily knew well, especially recently. When Sewell had been recounting her past year to her, that sadness that had filled her due to not being able to mention Zeke was loneliness. Forgetting Zeke for these past few days due to the love potion was loneliness. That was how large a part of Cecily's life Zeke was, and how much of her loneliness he helped to stave off.

I'm not sure I could keep on living without ever remembering Zeke...

As Charlotte had pointed out, though, even if Cecily had been able to keep on living, she would have been permanently stuck with a gloomy expression. Whatever she did, that dark cloud of loneliness would have followed her about.

Simply being with Zeke makes me happy.

It was truly a miracle that she had fallen in love with someone like that.

"Right—I should be off."

As Cain turned on his heel, Cecily hurriedly called out.

"Where are you going, Cain?"

"I won't slip out of the village without telling anyone. Catch you around," Cain said. He had a bright smile as he left the room.

Cecily silently watched him leave. Her chest was filled with a strange emotion. But in the next moment, she heard a sound from behind her. Turning around, she saw that Zeke was awake.

She spoke immediately.

"Zeke, let's get married."

"Huh?"

"Huh" was the answer you'd expect to receive upon making such a declaration—no matter how in love you might be with someone. After all, it would've been normal to say "You're finally awake!" or "How are you feeling?" or "I'll tell everyone you're up!"

But Cecily needed to say what she did.

"Zeke, I want to marry you as soon as I can!"

"Cecily..."

Zeke was still a bit out of it, but he could tell how serious Cecily was.

"All right then. Let's do it."

"Yeah!"

Naturally, the two of them were on the same page.

"But I'd like your family and the Celestial Knight Brigade to also be at our wedding, so this will be a little pre-wedding wedding held here in the witch village."

"A little wedding, huh...?" Zeke mumbled.

They didn't have much money, nor did they have much free time. Not only that, zero preparations had been made. They would be leaving the village before noon in two days' time, so it truly would be a small gathering—a wedding in name only. Be that as it may, however, Cecily still wanted to have a wedding here in the village where she'd spent fifteen years of her life, surrounded by everyone she'd grown up with, to celebrate her union with him.

"You can leave the preparations to me! I'll get everyone to help—it'll be a wonderful wedding."

"I'm sure it'll be the best day of my life."

Zeke smiled. Cecily nodded, tears threatening to pour out of her eyes—it felt like the first time in years since she had seen him smile.

Cecily gently took Zeke's hand. It was large, rough in places due to the life he'd spent swinging a sword. A brave yet gentle hand that fought to protect people.

"I caused you so much pain over these past few days... I won't ever make you feel like that again."

"It's not your fault, Cecily. More importantly, I should help with the preparations too."

As Zeke tried to sit up, Cecily pushed him back down.

"Hey, Zeke? Do you love me?"

"Yeah."

"Lots?"

"Lots and lots."

"Then rest up a bit more. You need to recover, my Zeke."

Zeke grumbled in protest, but as soon as he closed his eyes, his

breathing grew slower and deeper. It reaffirmed to Cecily how exhausted he really must have been. It was only natural—after their journey, he had spent a sleepless night here followed by hours of wandering a mountain.

"We don't need water from a legendary spring," Cecily murmured to herself.

Zeke had returned to the land of Nod, his hand warm in hers. She raised it to her cheek. It had always protected her. It had held her in a tight embrace. Her heart started to race just being touched by him. All of these emotions made words bubble up from inside of her.

"As long as we're together, I don't need anything else."

Cecily stayed by his side in quiet bliss for a little longer.

Chapter 7: The Wedding in the Witch Village

When it came to preparations for the impromptu wedding, Maria—the maid of the Snowflower Palace—really shone.

"Leave it to me," she said, patting her chest. True to her word, she performed far and beyond expectations.

The preparations began with invitations that were sent to every single person in the village, then the reservation of the village's one and only chapel, discussions with Cecily about the decorations and how the ceremony should be run, and finally onto the little cakes that would be gifted to all guests.

Not only that, Maria knew best how to put people to use. On each invitation was a small request to each villager to see if they could help with the preparations.

Some of the requests were as follows:

"I'd like you to help with the baking. If you have any suitable recipes you could share, please do."

"Could you go out with the children to pick some flowers from the flower field? We wish to make a lovely bouquet for the bride."

"I heard that you are skilled at making rose corsages. Would you lend your talents to the wedding?"

And on they went.

The reason Maria was able to make such personalized requests was because she had already gotten a bearing on each person's personality and what they were capable of during the preparations for the assembly hall party.

Cecily took her hat off to the incredible Maria, but even the bride-to-be couldn't rest on her laurels. After all, everything needed to be done in under two days. Cecily worked hard to help decorate the chapel as well as to prepare the couple's wedding dress and tuxedo.

As the night before the big day approached, Cecily was prepared to stay up late again helping out, but Maria curtly told her, "You can prepare for tomorrow by going to bed and getting some decent rest."

On the day of the wedding, Cecily woke early. She took a long soak in a flower-petal-filled bath, applied perfumed oil to her hair, and busied herself scrubbing her body clean.

By the time she was in the back room of the chapel putting on the wedding dress, she was exhausted, but it was a comforting exhaustion that enveloped her whole body.

"You've done so much, Maria. Thank you for everything."

Cecily had envisioned a far more hastily put-together wedding, but thanks to Maria, it looked to be a small but wonderful affair.

"Not at all. There are few opportunities for a maid to get to organize a wedding, so this was a fulfilling and enjoyable experience."

True to her word, Maria was beaming at Cecily.

Maria's final job was to apply Cecily's makeup and do her hair, now that she had finished changing. Maria was well accustomed to caring for Charlotte day in and day out, so there were no worries here.

"Lower your head, please, Lady Cecily."

"Right!"

As she sat in front of a dresser, Cecily did as Maria asked.

Charlotte was in the small room too, and had come a little earlier.

"Ahh, when I think of the day that you will fly the nest like this, Lady Charlotte, I feel so overcome with emotion," Maria said.

"Whoa... Maria, are you crying?" Charlotte said with surprise.

"Yes, I am just filled with concern about whether that day will actually come or not..."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"I meant what I said."

As the time of the ceremony drew close, Charlotte left. She was probably on tenterhooks right now.

Just as Cecily had thought things were quiet once again, her parents came bustling in.

"Oh, darling, you're incredibly dashing today!"

"Greta, you're cute, beautiful, and wonderful, all at once!"

Greta and Sewell came in with their arms around one another, exchanging little pecks on the lips every now and then. They weren't ashamed to show their love for one another in front of other people.

Cecily looked at them in the mirror with a vexed look in her eyes.

"This is my wedding, so why are you two showing off how in love you are?"

The comment was said with exasperation, but Cecily was also relieved because she finally felt like she had come home. Yes—this was just what they were like.

Sewell had been showering his daughter with love, buoyed by joy at her homecoming, but it was his wife to whom he showed the most affection. He loved his wife more than anything in the world. They hadn't been apart for all that long, but they only had eyes for each other.

They had been like this even when Cecily was a little girl. A rush of nostalgia passed over her as she saw them again now. She had really grown since she was a young girl who dreamed of a prince atop a white horse. To think that she would finally have found love for herself... She felt her cheeks redden.

"Mom, do you remember what you said to me back then? You said, 'Cecily! You can't have both love and marriage at once!'"

The words her mother had spoken that day had sent a dagger through the heart of the young Cecily, who had believed in the true love of her fairy tales.

Sewell stopped his flirtatious behavior and froze up. It seemed as if this was the first he was hearing of this.

"Huh? Greta, did you really say such a thing to dear Cecily?"

"Hmm, I may have done."

Greta showed no signs of remorse. She didn't know just how shocking those words had been to her daughter. Cecily, who'd grown up watching parents who seemed to get along very well, had asked back then, "Daddy loves you, doesn't he?"

However, Greta hadn't relented, and had coldly replied: "That's because I made him drink a love potion!"

“Because you said that to me back then, I suffered a lot growing up, you know?”

Cecily had discovered she was a witch, and had felt an almost unhealthily intense hatred towards love potions. She’d spent every day hating wicked witches, who were the enemies in her stories.

Perhaps finally starting to feel some remorse, Greta put a hand to her mouth.

“Oh dear, I only intended to tease you a little. I was, well...a little tipsy that day, shall we say.”

Cecily wasn’t about to just let this statement go.

“What? You were drunk?”

“Yes, I had a little too much to drink. I actually meant to say this...” Greta had a far-off look in her eye as she continued. “Cecily, you can’t have both love and marriage at once. That’s what I thought before—but it’s not true at all!”

Cecily was shocked into silence. And then—

“That means the complete opposite of what you said!” she yelled.

“I just paraphrased the end a little.”

“‘A little’?! You left it out completely!”

Cecily wanted to clasp her head in absolute despair, but Maria quipped, “You need to stay still,” so she remained as she was.

As Maria applied color to Cecily’s lips, all Cecily could do was listen to her parents talk.

“When I was younger, it is true that I didn’t believe in intangible things like love. That was until the day I made my darling drink that love potion, and everything changed.”

“Ahh, that takes me back. I almost forgot that happened!”

Forgetting his troubled daughter, Sewell dwelled on fond recollections of the past.

“Back then I remember you saying, ‘I’m going to steal you away from that rival of mine! Open wide—time for a love potion!’ as you made me drink it. Ahh, you were charming in how forthright you were. You were so cute! Well, you’re still beautiful now, of course!”

What?

This was news to Cecily. If she hadn’t been having her lips done, her jaw would have been on the ground.

Mom stole him away from a rival? So, another woman?

"Cecily, don't get the wrong idea. And you, darling—enough about the past!"

Greta didn't say any more, but she was the kind of person who possessed a whole range of facial expressions, and now her cheeks were puffed up in annoyance. For some reason, this childish act didn't look that out of place on her.

"Well, when I'm alone with you, even now, Greta, it's like back then, when we—"

"Daaaarling...?" Greta said pointedly.

"R-Right, that's a secret from Cecily! I know, I know."

Sewell nodded furiously, Greta's hand around his neck. It must have been something truly embarrassing for Greta to be acting like that.

"Back to what I was saying, Cecily," Sewell went on. "When I say 'rival,' I don't mean another woman."

"Huh? You didn't?"

Cecily gulped. Meanwhile, Maria blotted Cecily's lips with a piece of paper, and then her lips were done.

"You see, I owned this dog. Her name was Candy, and I cared for her every day. I loved her lots...but as a pet."

"A dog?!" Cecily shrieked, her confusion reaching its peak. Her newly colored lips glistened. "Mom, you were so jealous of a dog that you made dad drink a love potion?"

"There is no distinction between human or animal in the game of love!"

Greta's face was bright red. She had been her usual confident self until just a moment ago, but now she was embarrassed like a little girl.

Sewell went on with a big grin.

"But even before I drank that love potion, I liked her, this girl who lived in the same village as me. I often made the time to go and see her. I really admired her because she'd make potions and medicines for people, even if they'd been rude or cold to her. I thought it was really amazing."

"Oh, darling, don't romanticize the past! I was doing it for the

money."

"But what you made was always a fair sum. And you never took money from children. When I heard you say that, I thought you were fabulous and beautiful."

"Wow..."

They had begun flirting again as usual, but Cecily was excited to hear these new stories about their youth.

"You're all ready now, Lady Cecily."

"Thank you, Maria!"

Excited, Cecily leapt up.

Maria straightened out the train of Cecily's wedding dress. Seeing Cecily stand there in her wedding gown, Sewell couldn't help but murmur.

"You look truly beautiful, Cecily."

"She does. More beautiful than me...for today, at least," Greta said with decorum.

"Thank you, mom and dad," Cecily said with a smile.

Maria carefully handed the veil to Greta. It was the same veil Greta had worn when she'd married Sewell. There had been some adjustments to the lace as Maria fixed it up to be a little more modern.

Sewell started sobbing as he watched mother and daughter face one another. This was a meaningful moment, but Greta then spoke with extreme frankness.

"Cecily, this frail veil is not enough to protect you from disaster."

Cecily was stunned for a moment by this blunt statement.

"Is that something you should be saying at a time like this?"

Her face, which was still facing down, twisted unhappily. She had been looking forward to the ceremony, but this was now threatening to ruin it.

Greta let out a cheeky chuckle. She placed the veil with unusual gentleness upon Cecily's head.

"Which is why you need Zeke to protect you. And likewise, you need to protect him. That's what marriage is."

"Right."

"There'll be lots of laughs and lots of fights, so enjoy your life

together with him, okay? My darling Cecily."

"Thanks, mom."

Cecily sniffed back the tears which threatened to ruin her makeup.

The pair smiled at one another through the veil.

"Okay, let's go!" Cecily said with a big smile. She linked her arms through each of her parents'.

The doors to the chapel opened.

Some of the children who couldn't wait any longer had already started singing a hymn. Their cheerful voices, which could be heard from outside, made Cecily smile.

After taking the bouquet from Greta's hand, she walked through the doors and along the white carpet that had been rolled out in the aisle. The flower boys and girls cheerfully scattered pink petals before her as she walked.

"Cecily, you look so beautiful. I'm so happy for you!"

Charlotte, who was sitting in the seats in her own beautiful dress, called out, sounding like she was on the verge of tears. Alphonse was there beside her. As for Maria, she was also the master of ceremonies, so she was up at the altar, where she was clapping.

Aside from her friends from the royal capital, the room was full of familiar faces.

"Congrats, Cecily!"

"Look for me when you throw the bouquet!"

"Hey, that's no fair! Cheater! Throw it to me, Cecily!"

"No, me! Pleaaase!"

It was a wedding full of cheer, without a single person managing to merely watch in silence. Cecily was unable to keep a straight face and refrain from replying, so she called out over the clamor.

"Thank you all so much for today!"

She was positively beaming as she waded through the sea of petals before her.

Cecily hadn't even been engaged, yet here she was at her own wedding. Not only that, when the party was over, they needed to head back down the mountain, hop back into their carriages, and

make their way back to the royal capital. It was to be a busy day.

Yes, maybe this went against all sense of reason. The princesses in Cecily's beloved storybooks never hustled and bustled to pull together last-minute weddings.

But that's fine. This is how Zeke and I do things.

They had never followed the traditional expectations of a relationship, not since the beginning. Trying something a bit reckless like this wasn't bad. She was sure they would look back on this day, years or even decades from now, with a smile and say, "That was quite the silly thing we did, huh?"

It was the duty of the groom, already standing at the altar, to lift her veil.

Today Cecily was wearing high heels, so when she arrived at the altar, her face was much closer to his than usual. Cecily had to stifle a squeal of excitement at seeing him in his tuxedo.

He looks SO good...!

It was painful to keep a lid on her excitement, but she did her best.

Black hair slicked back. Sharp, hazel eyes. Zeke's body was enveloped in his white tuxedo, but his well-defined musculature was obvious to anyone.

So dashing! You're too dashing, Zeke!

Zeke had lifted the veil from Cecily's face, and seeing him straight on was almost enough to make Cecily faint.

"Ahh..."

Cecily wanted to bite down on her lip to bring herself back to her senses, but Maria's warning echoed in her mind. All she could do was let out a happy sigh.

However, Zeke had been quiet the whole time. She frowned in concern.

"Are you okay, Zeke?"

"Sorry, Cecily. You're so beautiful that I was struck speechless."

Zeke's blushing cheeks showed that these words came from the heart. Cecily did a happy spin, filled with joy at Zeke's unfettered compliment.

"We actually used a lace curtain as a basis for this dress. It might

be a bit more cheap-looking compared to the ones you would see in the royal capital, but...”

Maria had helped a little, but it was Cecily who’d chiefly made the dress. She’d added ribbons and frills, and worked hard to make it as beautiful as she could.

The décolletage exposed Cecily’s unblemished skin, and the skirt of her dress fell to around her knees—the length was picked so that Cecily, who was unused to wearing heels, wouldn’t fall over. A golden anklet was wrapped around one of her well-defined ankles, and glittered in the light. Her shoulder-length hair had been put up in a half-up half-down style by Maria.

I hope my hair grows a bit longer for our wedding in the royal capital...

As Cecily twirled her hair around a finger, Zeke shook his head.

“Don’t be silly. You look truly beautiful.”

Cecily thanked him with a grin.

Zeke’s eyes had been so focused on her mouth, but then in a moment he was looking off into the half distance, with his teeth biting down on his lower lip.

“Man... What am I to do, Cecily? My chest burns with pain. If I look at you any longer, I feel like I’ll die of happiness and go straight to heaven.”

“I want you to look at me, Zeke. But you’re not allowed to die,” Cecily replied, her hand on Zeke’s cheek. “The more you call me beautiful, the more beautiful I feel.”

“You’re already the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“And you’re the most dashing man in the world!”

Marjorika, who was officiating, let out a little cough.

“Would the lovely couple mind wrapping it up for now?” she said.

“Yes!” Cecily and Zeke said immediately. They had gotten so lost in each other that they had forgotten they were in the middle of the ceremony.

Marjorika was a teacher for the children of the village, in charge of heading up festivals and celebrations, and was the only ordained minister in the witch village.

In a calm voice, the old witch asked the couple to say their vows.

“Cecily and Zeke. Do you vow to take one another as wife and husband, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer; to love, respect, cherish, aid, and be faithful to one another?”

“I do,” the pair said at the same time.

A cascade of petals of all colors came tumbling from above their heads. A joyful applause enveloped them as they looked at one another.

“I’ll do everything in my power to make you happy, Cecily.”

“And I will too, Zeke.”

Zeke’s powerful arms drew Cecily in, and with smiles, they shared a kiss.





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In a small flower field...

With so few places to play in, this was a special place for the children of the witch village.

It was a place where children would meet, whether they were already friends or two who wished to know each other better. The flowers that bloomed there rose gracefully towards the heavens, quietly looking after the children that played there.

“I thought you’d be here,” Cecily said.

Cain knew it was Cecily standing a short distance away. He was lying amid the flowers, and answered in a small voice without looking her way.

“I’m sorry I didn’t go to the ceremony.”

“It’s all right.”

Cecily shook her head. She had no intention of berating him. She walked over to Cain and sat down beside him.

Cain had said he didn’t really have feelings for Cecily, but she was sure he was feeling awkward. None of the witches in the village would have cared if he’d showed up, so it was probably out of consideration to Zeke that he hadn’t attended the ceremony.

“How long have you got until you leave?”

“Um, about half an hour, maybe?”

Cecily smiled awkwardly at Cain. She had changed back into her normal clothes and had finished packing, so she had time to be here. She had told Zeke she was going to meet Cain, so she imagined Zeke was waiting somewhere impatiently. She really had been worrying him on every step of this journey back to her hometown.

“You may have forgotten, Cecily,” Cain said, choosing each word carefully, “but just before I left this village ten years ago, you and I did make a promise. We promised that, if we happened to meet one day again, you would listen to a request of mine.”

Cain’s voice was calm. Cecily answered just as calmly.

“Oh yeah... I remember you used to call me Cecy back then.”

"You remember?" Cain said, after a pause. Cecily felt him stir. He was probably looking up at her. She couldn't help but grin broadly.

"Yeah. I mean, Zeke went straight for 'Cecily' when we met. It felt strange—he was so polite yet direct when we first spoke. No formalities, no nicknames—just 'Cecily.'"

Zeke was still unaware how strong of a first impression he had made upon Cecily, and how much it had sent her heart aflutter.

Cain's expression stiffened.

"Anyway, I wondered if I could make that request now."

"If it's something I can help with."

Cain was Cecily's friend. If his request wasn't mean-spirited, she would gladly hear him out. That was the kind of friend she aspired to be.

Cain's eyes were watery. He took a few shaky breaths—in then out. He must have been incredibly nervous.

Cecily waited patiently, not saying a word. A strong gust blew the petals around their heads. This beautiful scene had played out in her memories ten years ago as well. She was awestruck by its beauty, and Cain smiled at her, his eyes creasing so that only a hint of his red irises could be seen. He spoke his request.

"My request is...for you to be happy, Cecy."

Cecily gave a big nod. It was a simple request—she had someone who had just vowed to make her happy. All the same, she was happy to hear her friend say this, after a decade-long wait.

With a happy smile, Cecily answered, just as she had done a few hours ago.

"I will. I'll be happy with Zeke."

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The witch village may not have had many attractions, but it had a large number of stores. A clothes shop, a knickknack shop, a canteen, a tavern, a florist, a beautician, and more.

On the day of the wedding, the tavern was open earlier than usual. All the same, it was still daytime, so only one seat was filled.

Another customer stepped inside and called out to the young

man in that seat, who was throwing back a strong drink that he'd poured himself.

"Someone's a bit upset, huh?"

"I can't handle this sober," Cain replied, clicking his tongue in frustration. He had already drunk a fair amount. When he spun around, he saw someone unexpected.

"S-Sewell."

"Hey, kid."

The voice had belonged to Cecily's father, Sewell. Cain froze up, worried that this man was about to murder him on the spot. He knew he had done plenty of awful things over the past few days. He hadn't only been riling up Zeke—he had also caused Sewell to faint by suddenly asking to marry Cecily.

Despite that, it didn't appear that Sewell had come to end his life.

"Mind if I join you?"

"S-Sure," Cain said, with a nervous nod. Sewell offered his thanks and sat in the chair next to Cain. It must have been rather old, for one of the legs snapped off, but fortunately the bartender quickly brought out a new one.

"May I?" Sewell said.

"S-Sure."

Cain poured some wine into the glass Sewell had lifted in front of Cain. Sewell noticed that there were already two empty bottles nearby.

After a sip, Sewell spoke.

"You didn't go to see them off, then?"

Cain twigged immediately that Sewell was talking about Cecily and her group.

"N-No, I didn't."

The party had left just before noon, so they must have reached the bottom of the mountains by now to join up with their carriages.

As Cain drank glass after glass, Cecily had gradually gone farther away—somewhere he would never be able to reach.

"I think there's more than just a few people who wouldn't want to see me there. Though I didn't do anything to make myself particularly likable, so that's fair enough, to be honest."

Not everyone was as kind as Cecily. Cain knew what he did wasn't something that would be so easily forgiven. He wasn't enough of a maverick to spoil even their departure from the village.

"Is Cecy going back to the royal capital?"

Sewell nodded politely at this question, with its obvious answer.

"Yep. They said they'd send a message when the next wedding is held."

The location of the witch village was hidden, which meant that you couldn't simply send a letter to it. Witches often used their familiars—usually a cat or bird—to deliver messages, but it may have been a bit tricky for Cecily, who wasn't so adept with her magical powers yet.

"So then, Cain, my boy. What's next for you?"

"I dunno."

Cain may have finished a decade-long bout of training, but he was still immature in many ways. He could return to the village he'd just left and start some more training, or maybe he could travel the world like witches his age were forced to do.

"You can stay here, you know? You're like a son to me and Greta, you know that?"

Cain paused before saying, "I'll think about it."

It was a less than enthusiastic response, but Sewell gave a happy nod.

"There was something else. A little birdie told me that apparently you didn't actually love Cecily all that much?"

Cain didn't reply. It wouldn't have been like Cecily to bring that up herself. It was probably that girl who'd called herself a detective who'd told Sewell. How irritating. Cain felt frustration flare up within him, but she was already too far away for him to moan at. Maybe she was sticking her tongue out right about now, happy that he had gotten his just deserts.

"Yeah, I did. I've only ever thought of Cecily as a friend. The whole thing with the love potion was to rile up that annoying knight just a mite."

"Cain... That was kind of you."

Cain had no idea what Sewell was talking about, so he didn't say

a word. But Sewell went on, consoling that tender part of Cain's heart.

"You told a lie so that she would be able to leave without any lingering worries. I'm grateful for that, my boy."

"That's not it at all!" Cain said, unable to stop himself from smacking the table. "I just didn't want to admit that my heart was broken! So don't flatter me. It makes my skin crawl."

"If you say so, then I suppose the matter's settled, then."

Sewell was unflappable. He may have known there was more to it, but he didn't pursue it further. It was because of that that Cain found he had nothing else to say. No, that wasn't right—he didn't *want* to say anything else. He didn't want to continue to deny the love he had truly felt, to lie and say that his feelings had never existed.

The promise he had made ten years ago had been special to him. Thanks to it, he had been able to see a light at the end of the tunnel of his rigorous training. He'd dreamt about the romantic reunion that had awaited him. And yet, Cecily had basically all but forgotten the promise.

And so, Cain was lonely. The fact that what was so important to him wasn't also important to Cecily made him feel a deep sadness which almost brought tears to his eyes. It made him feel betrayed. Even if Cecily had called Cain her friend despite forgetting, it still hurt.

"If I had asked Cecy to marry me back then, ten years ago... If I had called her 'Cecily' and had been more direct about everything... Would things be different now? Would I have been able to be by her side?"

Cain knew he was speaking merely of hypotheticals. Sewell rubbed his chin in thought.

"Hmm, I don't know about that. The only thing I am sure about is that he...that Zeke is a good man."

Cain's eyebrows lifted in confusion at Sewell's contented tone.

"Hold up—I thought you were against their wedding?"

Even Cain had heard that Sewell had essentially forced Zeke out of his home after the couple had announced their desire to get

married. It was weird to hear him be so complimentary of Zeke.

Perhaps Sewell was aware of his previous attitude, for he gave a nervous smile.

"Aha ha ha... When Cecily came to tell me she was going to hold a wedding, I said 'Okay' just like that."

"Did you have a reason for changing your mind?"

"Well, the night before Cecily asked me, Zeke came knocking at my door. He was terribly injured, but he bowed his head and asked for my permission to marry Cecily." Cain looked on suspiciously as Sewell went on. "I didn't want to accept it. I said, 'Why do you need my permission? Why don't you just whisk her away?' But he didn't budge despite my cruelty. He said, 'You raised Cecily with so much love, which is why I want you to be there to celebrate her marriage.' Zeke looked at me with such an honest expression that I couldn't help but give my blessing." Sewell chuckled at the memory. "Just before he left, he said, 'Keep this a secret from Cecily.' From that comment and his guilty face, I presumed that he had slipped out without telling her. I'm sorry, my boy, but I don't think even ten years is enough to fight against the strings of fate that bind them together."

Cain didn't really understand what Sewell meant by "fate," but he understood the gist. A simple spoken promise from ten years ago wasn't enough to bind Cecily to him. That rough, burly knight could cut that down in a second, and win Cecily's hand without issue.

"Cecily's really grown up without my noticing. It makes me feel kind of lonely, but it also makes me proud and happy."

Sewell's attitude hadn't changed despite Cain's poor mood, and so Cain decided to continue to be honest with him.

"I feel left behind too. I didn't expect Cecy to grow this beautiful in only ten years."

"You said it. Even in the past year, she's grown incredibly lovely. I suppose it was thanks to Zeke."

One year... One short little year.

Sewell had been fiercely against the rule in witch society that deemed that all fifteen-year-old witches must travel the world for two years, but it had been this journey that had helped her become

so beautiful now. That little girl who was always following her father about with an innocent smile no longer existed. She had already found an irreplaceable life partner. She had finally flown the nest.

"Hurts, huh?" Cain said.

"Sure does."

Though his reply was brief, Sewell's voice could be heard shaking.

Unable to look at him, Cain downed his drink. Wiping his lips, he forced the words out with a glint in his eye.

"When Cecy has her wedding in the royal capital, I'm gonna make sure I'm able to be there. If I don't, then that won't be cool at all. My pride won't allow it."

"A gargantuan task, eh, Cain?" Sewell said with a laugh. "Cecily was a crybaby when she was growing up, but that was nothing compared to you. I remember you'd come to me crying whenever you wet the bed, asking me how to make it stop happening!"

"Oh, enough of that," Cain snapped.

Tears had finally made their way to the corners of Cain's eyes. Even Sewell could tell. As for Sewell, he had already finished crying and crying and crying. He had wailed far more than Cain, almost enough to create a puddle at his feet.

"All right—bottoms up. Tonight, we drink! We're going to drink like fishes."

"Yeah!"

"Barkeep, give us your strongest stuff. No, not the bottle—the whole damn barrel!"

"We'll drink it dry!"

Faces red from the booze, Cain and Sewell put their arms over each other's shoulders. The bartender simply shrugged and prepared a barrel, just as they'd ordered.

"Nothing beats booze to help you forget the blues!" Cain said, pain obvious in his voice.

"You said it! Nice to see you can hold your drink. Been a while for me, but I'm more than happy to join you."

And so these two men drowned their sorrows in drink, making merry so that their tears wouldn't have time to flow.

Epilogue: Their Love Will Continue to Accelerate

On their return home from the witch village, Charlotte, Alphonse, and Maria had kindly permitted Cecily and Zeke to travel alone in one of the carriages. Cecily was a bit concerned whether Charlotte would be all right being trapped in a small space with Alphonse due to her fear of men, but she was glad of the opportunity to properly talk to Zeke alone.

But what's wrong with him?

Zeke hadn't spoken a single word since they had both boarded the carriage. He merely gazed out the window from his forward-facing seat. Cecily glanced over at his perfectly sculpted profile and sighed inwardly.

When they had originally set off on this journey, Cecily had known that convincing Sewell to give them his blessing would be a gargantuan task, but she hadn't expected her entire homecoming to be one incident after another.

How could I have let myself be controlled by a love potion?

Momentarily putting aside the fact that she had once tried to make Zeke drink one, she fumed internally at her own stupidity.

And to think that my feelings for Zeke could lose to a dumb potion!

Cecily chewed her lip in frustration. What she had done was unforgivable.

It was true that she had eventually broken free of the spell of Cain's love potion, but her carelessness had led her beloved Zeke to be injured, in more ways than one. A great despair filled her chest as she thought back to the awful events that had transpired.

And yet, through it all, Zeke had refused to let Cecily go. He had swallowed his pride and asked Cain for an antidote, he had met with

danger in search of a mythical spring that no one could prove existed—he had done so much, all for the sake of making Cecily's heart her own again.

Then, at the end of it, Cecily had taken advantage of him in his bedridden state to ask him to marry her right away! He wasn't in the right mind to make a clearheaded decision, but that had been the first thing that had come out of her mouth.

A whole range of emotions, from guilt to shame, came over Cecily as she thought back on what she had done. All the same, she'd had good reason for her request.

I just wanted to marry him so much!

Cecily piled excuse on top of excuse in her internal monologue.

I couldn't bear to go one more moment without being married to him!

Having finally won back her heart and her love for Zeke, she couldn't wait for one minute or even one second longer. She wanted to be Zeke's; she wanted Zeke to be hers. Maybe it was an aftereffect of the love potion, but this unstoppable desire—an emotion so strong as to make her feel almost wretched—had swirled within her, threatening to swallow her whole.

Waiting until they were back in the royal capital and taking their sweet time to prepare for the wedding had been unthinkable. It had been impossible. And so, Cecily had chosen to hold an impromptu wedding in her hometown.

She had approached Sewell once again to ask for his approval without any particular plan in mind, and yet for some reason he had agreed to the wedding without much fuss at all. In light of how he'd originally reacted, something must have caused this change of heart, though it was hard to believe. Cecily didn't question it, though—she was merely happy about it.

At the end of it all, their wedding had been filled with smiles and joy—yet here they now were, starring in a scene that one could hardly label marital bliss.

Cecily reflected on the happy moments from their wedding, then was drawn back to her senses by a movement from Zeke.

"I'm sorry, Cecily, for being so quiet," Zeke said, his contrition

clear on his face.

"I-It's okay," Cecily said. She had been just as quiet.

After puzzling through how best to put his thoughts into words, Zeke finally went on. "I just feel a bit nervous, for some reason."

"Nervous?"

"Yeah—weird, isn't it? We just got married."

"It's not weird at all, Zeke."

After all, Cecily was also nervous.

Zeke always puts his thoughts into words, no matter how difficult it is.

Even though the honesty potion had long since worn off, Zeke continued to face his true thoughts head-on, and talk them through with Cecily. His earnestness was endearing, and Cecily wanted to respond to this honesty with her own.

"I'm really nervous too, you know?"

"You are? That makes the two of us, then."

Cecily had a particular reason to feel that way, however. She mustered up her courage and reached over to her bag. She opened it and pulled out something that she had prepared.

"I'm sorry I didn't manage to wrap it."

"Wait, this is..."

Zeke grinned widely. Obviously, he had no way of knowing just how much that made Cecily's heart race.

"Are you giving this to me? What a wonderful gift."

"Well, I'm not 'giving' it to you, I..." Cecily paused and twiddled her thumbs. She had hemmed and hawed this long—it was time to tell the truth. "The thing is, I'm returning it to you. This is yours, Zeke. It's that handkerchief that I never managed to return to you—do you remember?"

After blinking a few times, Zeke nodded in recognition.

"How could I forget? This is the handkerchief I gave you the first day we met."

"Yeah, it is."

Cecily smiled at Zeke. That day seemed so long ago now.

It had happened months ago, in the royal capital. Cecily had visited a small store of knickknacks and had been accused of

stealing some fabric. This allegation had been unfounded—it was simply because she was a witch that they had believed her to be at fault. As fingers pointed at her and tears threatened to flow down her cheeks, Zeke had gallantly swooped in and saved her.

Cecily had wanted to thank him, but instead she'd found herself in tears and unable to speak. It was then that he had presented her this handkerchief, as if to say that she didn't need to force herself to stop crying.

That was the moment Cecily had fallen in love with Zeke—with this elite knight, who was far more dashing and kind than any prince in a fairy tale.

It's thanks to Zeke that my days have magically been filled with color and joy.

There had been misunderstandings and confusion, but Zeke had drawn Cecily out of her shell and led her into a whole new world. The old Cecily, who'd whiled the days away, hoping for the second year of her journey to end so that she could finally go home, was no more. She had met wonderful people, and had smiled and laughed a lot. In that sense, the handkerchief that Zeke had given her on their first meeting was almost a physical representation of this new life.

"I'm sorry. I kept it as a memento to protect me, and never managed to return it. Then I figured I couldn't just simply give it back after all this time, so I thought I'd embroider something on it for you. It's not very good, so I hope you don't hate it..."

"How could I hate it?" As Cecily's voice started to deflate, Zeke couldn't hold back these words. "I'm really happy, Cecily. I feel like I could do a little dance right here in this carriage!" He was all smiles as he gently caressed the handkerchief. "I'm over the moon, honestly. I'll treasure it until the day I die—no, even after I die!"

"Don't say that—I don't want you to die, Zeke."

"Then I won't. I'll be by your side forever, Cecily."

The pair stared at each other for a few moments in impassioned silence. After a few seconds, Cecily looked away.

"This can't even begin to make up for what I did," she said, remembering her worries again.

"What do you mean?"

"I know it was temporary, but I was put under the illusion that I loved someone else! I even *said* that I loved him! I can't believe I would say such things to someone who wasn't you..."

As Cecily brought up the topic, Zeke raised his well-shaped eyebrows in an expression of concern.

"Zeke, you have every right to be mad at me. I know you must have hated seeing me like that. I mean, I was completely under the spell of thinking I loved someone else."

Zeke was silent a moment before he spoke.

"Cecily, can I be honest with you right now?"

"Of course not. Say whatever you need to."

Cecily prepared herself, sitting up properly. She had a responsibility to listen to what he had to say.

"I wanted to punch Cain's lights out and steal you back by force. Those thoughts kept going through my head," Zeke said, in a quiet voice. "I didn't know that such fiery jealousy lurked inside my heart."

"Zeke..." Cecily said. She had also been unaware of this.

Zeke was the captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade, a group that put their lives on the line to protect the Carzenia Kingdom—he was the absolute cream of an elite crop. It was well within Zeke's ability to have chosen a more aggressive way of doing things. Cain may have been a talented wizard, but there was no way his slight frame could have stood up to Zeke's well-honed brawn.

"But in the end, all I did was end up showing you my pathetic side," Zeke said, with a self-deprecating grin.

"No, Zeke! That's not the case at all!" Cecily said, furiously shaking her head. She then pulled her fists up in front of her. "You were gallant and brave. If anyone dares to call you pathetic, I'll sock them good!"

Zeke let out a chuckle.

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course! I'll give them the ol' one-two!"

Cecily couldn't help but remember that moment in the assembly hall. Zeke had drawn his blade in a heated moment, but in the end he hadn't resorted to force. Maybe one of the reasons why he had pushed that anger down and chosen a path of nonviolence stemmed

from the desire not to make Cecily cry. Because, at the end of the day, Cain was still Cecily's friend.

That was why, after Zeke had left the assembly hall that night, he had vented his feelings by swinging his sword until dawn, channeling his pain into exhaustion. When Cecily had found out about this, she'd felt a warmth deep within her chest.

Zeke really does love me...

The emotion that they shared now wasn't merely a youthful notion of romance. They prayed for one another's happiness; they treasured those whom their partner also treasured. It was true love.

That's why he did what he did.

Enveloped by Zeke's gentle kindness, Cecily cast her mind to another reality. A world where Zeke had knocked Cain out cold, swept Cecily up in his arms, showered her with kisses while giving her no room to object, and said something like, "I'll never let you go until you finally remember me."

"A part of me kind of wants to have seen you lose control like that, Zeke..." Cecily murmured to herself, as her cheeks flushed with the thought. She knew she was saying something terribly shameless. Zeke's ears easily caught what she'd said, and his head twisted around to her with an almost audible sound. Her blush became a deeper shade of red.

"You sure about that, Cecily?"

"O-Of course I am!" she said with a squeak, as her face burned intensely.

Although Zeke was treated as a stoic, straitlaced sort by his fellow knights, he knew how to use humor to ease the situation. Not only that, Zeke understood what it was that Cecily wanted.

Shifting his weight and adjusting his position, Zeke stared intensely down at Cecily. Even this was enough to make Cecily's heart race.

"My love for you is only accelerating, yet here you were, gallivanting around with another man! You know we can't let this matter slide, can we?"

"Are you going to punish me?" Cecily said, looking up at Zeke, eyes swimming.

“Well, you’re looking at me with an expression that says, ‘Yes, please.’ What a naughty girl you are.” Zeke had seen right through her.

Cecily moved before Zeke even had a chance to pull her into him. She lifted herself up for a kiss, and...felt her teeth bash into his. It stung a little, and wasn’t exactly a perfect way for her to initiate a kiss for the first time, but she felt it was worthy (with some leeway) of a passing mark.

“You better be ready yourself, Zeke,” Cecily said. Zeke’s eyes were wide, and she smiled to have finally caught him unawares. “My love for you won’t stop for even one more second!”

Twigging the situation behind him, the coachman slowed the carriage down to a more relaxed pace than they’d kept for the journey to the village. There was still plenty of time before they returned to the royal capital.

Extra Story 1: The Red-Haired Witch Who Lives Alone

In the village where Sewell lived, there also lived a witch.

The first son to his family, Sewell had grown up in relative prosperity. Their home dealt in lumber, and they often received requests to deliver their stock to nearby towns and villages. A number of people were employed to work for the family, and they even owned a big dog.

It all began one day, when the ten-year-old Sewell was having some cake for dessert. Other plates, laden with madeleines, cookies, and more, also decorated the table. The reason Sewell had a more "esteemed" physique than other kids his age was due to the fact that he enjoyed treats and snacks far more than he enjoyed regular meals...which was not to say he did not also love his three square meals a day.

At any rate, Sewell was munching away as he watched his long-haired brown dog bound about the family's big garden. Sewell's fondness for treats had led to his dog being named "Candy."

All of a sudden, Candy let out a huge bark. She was the family's guard dog, and, being well-trained, only barked when someone suspicious was nearby. Sewell glanced over, and saw a figure passing down the street by their garden.

"Wait, is that...?" he said, eyes narrowing, as he swallowed the last bit of his madeleine.

Candy was barking at a girl who was walking swiftly by.

The girl had waist-length red hair, which was so untamed that Sewell doubted she had ever combed it before. In the gaps between her bird's-nest-like hair, two dangerously fierce red eyes peeped out. Perhaps this skinny girl whose long hair hid most of her face had scared Candy.

“Candy, stop that! Enough of that noise,” Sewell said. Candy let out a small whine and obediently came back to Sewell. He stroked the head of his large, obedient friend, and looked up again, only to find that the girl was no longer there.

Sewell wondered when it was that he’d first started seeing her around. Noticing his interested stare, the family housekeeper opened her mouth.

“Dearie me, what a filthy girl she was. Make sure to avoid that repugnant little creature, young master.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s a witch.”

Sewell had only ever heard of witches from fairy tales—wicked creatures who sought to destroy the relationship between the prince and princess who were in love. But to Sewell, that barefooted girl who walked by all on her own didn’t seem like a bad person.

“That girl’s taken up residence in a small shack on the outskirts of our village. The other villagers who have gone to investigate said that a foul smell exudes from that place, day in and day out. I expect that she’s cooking up some detestable concoctions in there. How dreadful this whole affair is.”

“I see...” Sewell said, putting on an obedient act. The housekeeper seemed satisfied with his response.

Unfortunately, this was a crucial mistake on her part, for any child who’d heard such a tale would certainly be filled with curiosity.

A day later, Sewell snuck out of his house. He had finished his studies and his chores for the day, so he presumed neither of his parents would have any qualms if they did find out about this. As he headed out of the village, a strange scent came wafting to his nose.

“It smells like,” Sewell said, sniffing the air with his large nose, “a potion.”

Many in the village had complained, saying it stank or reeked, and they may have been right. But to Sewell, the smell didn’t seem that awful at all.

It didn’t take him long to get to the shack. It was a small building, hardly large enough to be called a house. Holding his breath, Sewell knocked upon the door.

From inside, he heard someone shuffling about. Soon, the door—which was no more than a single sheet of wood, really—creaked open.

The girl, who was wearing nothing but a patchwork of cloth scraps, was clearly surprised to see Sewell standing at her door.

"It's you..." she said. Behind this curt greeting lay a voice that Sewell couldn't help but find cute. She came closer to Sewell, eyeing him, and he saw that she seemed close to him in age. Sewell's heart began racing. This was the first time a girl had ever come this close to him.

"I remember you. You're the chubby kid from the lumber dealer's house. What d'you want?"

Sewell was surprised to learn that she knew who he was. His cheeks flushed red with joy at this fact.

"H-Hello," he said, but the girl merely looked at him with an unhappy expression.

"You here to request some medicine?"

"Request? What's that mean?"

In the next instant, the door slammed shut, bringing an end to the pair's first proper meeting.

The next day, Sewell headed over to the shack on the outskirts of the village once again. The girl wasn't in her house like before, but was instead crouching by the edge of the forest.

"What're you doing?" Sewell said, thudding over heavily. However, the girl merely let out a big sigh before walking off without a word.

"What's your name? My name's Sewell!"

The girl remained silent, but Sewell paid this no mind. He simply wanted to talk to her—to hear that sweet voice once again.

And so he headed over to her shack the day afterwards, and the day after that too.

The girl chased him off, sometimes using a broom, but Sewell didn't let that stop him. His desire to talk to her was that strong.

On this day in particular, he found the girl picking some herbs that were growing by the path. He had noticed that she always used

the fireplace and cauldron that had been left behind in the shack for her potion making.

"Why'd you choose to live here?"

Out of the many questions that Sewell had asked so far, this was the only one to which the girl instantly reacted. She glared up at Sewell with murderous intent.

"Am I not allowed to be here? Are you gonna try and chase me off, just like the other villagers?"

The girl's air was far colder than it had been even a second ago. The emotion that filled Sewell's breast then wasn't joy at this long-awaited reply, but guilt.

"Not at all! I just heard that most witches live in a place called a 'witch village,' so I was curious... I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable."

His furious desire to learn more about this girl had gotten ahead of him, and had resulted in him not asking his question properly.

At Sewell's honest apology, the fire left the girl's eyes. And so, she finally answered him.

"My mom died in an accident."

This was the pain of the girl's reality, which Sewell, who'd grown up in a well-off household without worries or cares, had never known.

"I dunno who my dad is," she went on. "I don't know his name or what he looks like—only that he ran off, abandoning my mom when she was pregnant with me. She gave birth to me all alone and raised me alone too. There was no one in her life that she could ask for help. Then, after mom died, I was chased out of the village where we lived. I walked here, and almost died in the process. That's the only reason I live here."

The girl told her tale with all the frankness in the world, and Sewell couldn't help how he reacted to this sorrowful story.

"H-Hey, stop crying. It's creeping me out," she said, visibly awkward.

Sewell wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. His nose was still running.

"I wish I could've been your mom."

The girl looked absolutely shocked.

"A little kid like you? Being my mom? Quit it with the creepy jokes."

"I'm being honest! You just looked so...lonely."

"You trying to sympathize with me? I don't need any—"

"That's not it! I just thought you were so beautiful."

Sewell had been enraptured since the day he'd first laid eyes upon her. *It must be true that witches have magical powers*, he thought. After all, Sewell had been bewitched in no time flat and had come here every day in search of her.

"I just thought it would be nice if you had a life where you could smile a lot—then you'd be even more beautiful! So if I was your mom, then I thought I'd have the power to make you smile."

"You think I'm beautiful?" the girl said, after a moment's shocked silence. Sewell was confused by her reaction—he was only telling the truth. He continued to wipe away his tears as he nodded.

"Yeah! You're really beautiful. I love your vibrant red hair and your fiery red eyes. And how strong you are, to be able to keep on going on your own."

As Sewell spoke, he cocked his head to one side in confusion. It wasn't just her eyes and hair that were red—her cheeks and her ears had started to glow red too.

Coming back to her senses, the girl spun away from Sewell in a rush.

"Are you stupid? Who says sappy crap like that with a straight face?"

"I'm not being sappy, I'm just being honest!"

"Quit it!"

"Ow!"

A slap stung Sewell's cheek as he stood proudly up to her. As tears welled up in his eyes for a very different reason than before, the girl made a curt announcement.

"It's Greta."

"Huh?"

"That's my name, you dum-dum!" she said, sticking her tongue out mockingly before going back inside and slamming the door.

Sewell tried to keep a lid on his absolute joy.

"Greta!"

Even her name was adorable. Up on cloud nine for the rest of the day, Sewell practiced saying her name over and over. Even after he'd gone to bed, thoughts of her kept him awake until the early hours.

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The pair continued to see one another. Whatever else the day demanded of him, Sewell always found time to go and see Greta.

Greta, for her part, no longer chased Sewell off without a word. There were days when she wanted to be alone, but now she would preface this wish with, "Get lost." This was a big improvement in Sewell's eyes. However, he did have one concern.

"Greta, you're all skin and bones. I'm worried."

"Anyone would be, compared to you," Greta said, tutting loudly.

However, Sewell disagreed. Greta was far thinner than all the other kids who were Sewell's age. It was because she lived an impoverished existence and couldn't afford to eat proper meals.

Apparently, Greta made a living from the potions she created using her powers as a witch. The reason Sewell wasn't certain about this was because he had never once seen her sell any of her potions.

According to Greta, some of the villagers requiring her potions came up to her door in the middle of the night. She respected their privacy and didn't tell Sewell their names—despite her young age, Greta was wiser than actual adults in some ways. The compensation she received from her work was unfortunately not enough to fill her stomach. One of the chief reasons for this was that many in the village discriminated against Greta for being a witch, and so they often refused to sell things to her, or, if they did, it was with unfair markups.

Greta's meals consisted mostly of meager soups or some of the herbs and vegetables that grew in the wild. Sewell was panicking—at this rate, she wouldn't last through the winter. It was then that Sewell hit upon an idea: he decided he would deliver food to her. Today was the first time he had come bearing a gift.

“You’re not wrong,” he said. “Anyway, this is for you. Please eat it.”

“I don’t want your charity.”

Sewell was a bit troubled to be flat-out rejected.

“It’s not charity... I made these cookies for you. I wanted you to have them.”

Greta let out a snort. “Homemade cookies? Well, doesn’t the rich boy have it good! What a refined little hobby you have.”

“Well, this is the first time I’ve actually made them. I wanted to give you something, so I asked my mom how to bake them. Um, it would make me really happy if you gave them a try!”

As Sewell grew redder and redder in his earnest explanation, Greta was dumbfounded yet again. Sewell was holding the basket with shaking hands. As she took it from him, Greta murmured to herself in exasperation upon noticing its weight.

“This is way too full.”

“Sorry. I brought the amount that I usually eat...”

Greta was a girl, after all. Sewell made a mental note to keep in mind her smaller stomach when cooking for her in the future.

To his surprise, Greta picked up one of the tea-towel-wrapped cookies. Sewell’s heart was in his throat, threatening to burst with nervousness.

She bit into it with a crunch. Sewell mustered up his courage to ask, “H-How is it?”

“Sweet.”

“I used lots of sugar!” Sewell said, with an embarrassed laugh.

Despite her complaints, Greta reached in for another cookie. Sewell was filled with an overwhelming joy and couldn’t stand still.

“They ended up being a bit dry this time, but don’t worry, I’m going to keep practicing and get even better. You can leave it to me!”

The sound of Greta crunching away filled the silence for a moment.

“You really are thickheaded, huh?” Greta said.

“Not at all! I’m actually pretty smart. My teacher often tells me so.”

"*That's* exactly what I was talking about, you idiot."

Sewell thought about what he would bake next. If he practiced, he was sure to get better at it. He could try adding in walnuts or other types of nuts, or maybe dried fruits, or maybe cheese... If he adjusted some of the ratios, that would change the mouthfeel too. These thoughts and a greater motivation welled up in him as he thought of what would suit Greta's palate.

Sewell had been a boy who'd gladly eaten any and all treats prepared for him, but it seemed now that he was more suited to the role of giver. This was something about himself that his meeting with Greta had brought to light—being with her had a way of showing him new facets of himself.

Greta kept grumbling as she ate the entire basket of cookies. Sewell had been intending to finish any she didn't eat, but seeing Greta eat every last crumb made him so happy that his heart felt full.

"Greta, what are your favorite foods? Sweets or dishes...whatever, really. I'll work hard to learn how to make them for you, so just let me know."

"Your cookies," Greta said quietly, after a pause.

"Huh?"

Sewell had barely caught what she said.

"Shut up, you stupid idiot! Go home!" Greta snapped, slapping him on the back.

Sewell had been about to laugh, but his breath caught in his throat. As he fell into a coughing fit, Greta could only look on, the blood draining from her face.

"S-Sorry... Did I really hit you that hard?"

She seemed to think it was her fault. Sewell shook his head.

"No, you didn't. When winter approaches, I often get a bit sick. They say my lungs are weak. My bronchial tubes in particular."

It had been like this since Sewell was a baby—it was just a fact of life. He had essentially accepted his ailment, but when winter came along and brought his worsening condition along with it, he couldn't help but feel a bit depressed. Every year, he spent the winter months almost entirely stuck in bed.

Greta looked totally serious as she listened to Sewell's story.

"Do you cough up phlegm?" she asked.

"Hmm, not really. It's just dry coughing."

Greta paused for a moment, deep in thought, before curtly saying, "Wait here." She popped into her house quickly.

Left at the doorstep, Sewell looked up at the sky, which was coated in gray. It would probably snow in a few days.

If the snow sticks around, it would be fun to make a snowman with Greta...

Soon, Greta returned and handed him the basket he had earlier given to her.

"Take this home with you."

Noticing its weight, Sewell peered into the basket and found something inside.

"What's this? Blue candy?"

"It's a special medicine I created that will help you stop coughing. Take one in the morning and one before bed. They're in the form of a sweet, so they shouldn't be bitter. Also, have a teaspoon of honey in the evenings. I bet you have some, don't you? Got all that?"

Sewell could only stand there in surprise. Meanwhile, Greta reached out and grabbed his hands. They were cold, and she rubbed them to warm them up. There were a number of blisters on her small palms, as well as the remnants of some that had burst. These had probably come from the labor-intensive work of grinding up herbs with a pestle and mortar.

"Not only that, but don't let your throat get too dry. Drink lots of water every day. Got it, blockhead?"

"Y-Yeah!"

"Good."

Greta knew way more than he did about the world, so Sewell vowed to do exactly as she'd ordered.

✧ ✧ ✧

A week later, Sewell's excited voice rang around Greta's shack.

"Greta, it's amazing! You're amazing!"

"Keep it down."

"Every winter was so hard for me, but thanks to the candies you gave, I haven't coughed in the slightest!"

Sewell's excitement was understandable. The day Greta had given him the cough drops and advice, he had drunk a lot of water and taken some honey and a cough drop before going to bed. The change had been palpable. On winter nights, Sewell would often wake himself up with his coughing, but he'd slept through the night. Not only that, the medicine his doctor had given had tasted awful, so he had secretly disposed of it while pretending to still be taking it. Greta's medicine was far more delicious, and it even became something he looked forward to each day.

"You're incredible, Greta. It's like magic!"

Greta looked embarrassed in the face of Sewell's unabashed joy.

"Are you drinking enough?"

"Yeah, two whole bucketfuls!" he said with joy.

Having reached her limit with Sewell's ridiculousness, Greta snorted as she said, "That's way too much!"

However, Sewell's eyes were glittering.

"You smiled! I knew your smile was incredibly beautiful too!"

"Enough of that!"

"Ouchie!"

Greta gave Sewell a quick smack to distract him from her embarrassment. It was a light, playful smack, so it didn't hurt Sewell in the slightest, but he played along and let out a loud cry.

However, Sewell soon grew quiet. Of course, Greta noticed this change in him.

"What's up?"

Sewell didn't reply immediately—it took him a moment to get the words out.

"Greta, I have a request. I'll pay you."

"If it's about the cough drops, don't worry. They're thanks for the lasagna and cookies you bring."

"It's something else."

Greta squinted at Sewell as he beat about the bush. Finally, he managed to say it.

“Our housekeeper is sick. She’s been stuck in bed, and her fever won’t go down.”

“Have you gotten a doctor to look at her?”

“We did, but the doctor doesn’t know what the cause of her illness is.”

Greta scratched her cheek awkwardly as she looked down at the crestfallen Sewell.

“Fine... I’ll have a look.”

“She might be a bit rude to you, though, Greta...” Sewell said, clenching his hands into fists. Sewell’s housekeeper had looked down on Greta before, calling her filthy. “But all the same, she’s done so much for me.”

“I said I’d help, jeez.” Greta stood up, as if bored by the conversation. “You wanna help her, right? Then let’s get going.”

“All right!”

Yes, Greta was amazing. Sewell followed behind the girl, completely taken by her.

“Who in their right mind would allow a witch to help them?!”

Sewell’s housekeeper’s reaction was far more intense than he had anticipated. The middle-aged woman, who was stuck in bed, had enough energy to shout, but not enough to get up.

Sewell’s live-in housekeeper had looked after him since he could remember, yet this was the first time he had seen her so angry that a vein bulged on her temple.

“Oh, quit your whining,” Greta said angrily. Sewell moved in to speak up for her.

“Please, madam, Greta’s come to help. Her medicines really do work. I’m sure she can help you!”

“Young master—! You’ve been hoodwinked by this wicked witch! Ohh, how will I ever explain this to the mistress?”

Sewell was at a loss for what to do in the face of her crying, but Greta spoke up with a cool air.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if you die in this bed. But to be honest, if you’re going to die anyway, then it won’t matter if a creepy witch like me helps you or not. If you get better, then that’s great, but if

you don’t, then you were just gonna die anyway.”

Greta had simply stated her piece without a trace of anger. This detached explanation was perhaps the scariest thing for Sewell’s housekeeper.

“I...I’m going to die?”

The color drained completely from the housekeeper’s face.

“Yep. Unlike witches, normal people die quickly. You think you can delay the inevitable, but any time bought amounts to barely anything.”

Perhaps Greta’s threats had worked, for the housekeeper finally agreed to be seen by the witch. All the same, she complained at every stage, from the examination to the prescription. For her part, Greta let the words wash over her without blinking an eye.

Then, on the way home, Greta told Sewell a surprising fact.

“I know you can keep a secret, so I’ll let you in on something, Sewell.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Your housekeeper often comes to my place. Asking for ointments.”

Sewell couldn’t believe what he was hearing, but Greta continued with a grin.

“Her bangs are long, right? They’re to hide this big purple boil she has there. Her rude behavior towards me is just to throw people off about how she actually comes to see me. What a poor performance, all for the sake of covering up a lie.”

Sewell didn’t know how to reply.

“I think she was in shock when I came with her employer’s young master, scared that she’d been found out,” Greta went on. “If she had enough energy to leave her bed, she would’ve come and got the medicine from me herself, I think.”

Sewell felt like crying. But Greta had been so brave, and she was smiling, so he held the tears back so as not to ruin the moment.

“Everyone’s so stupid about this...”

“You said it. The world’s full of people who only think of themselves. So, then, Young Master Sewell...”

Hearing his name, Sewell looked at Greta. She was looking up at

the sky.

"It can't be fun hanging around with someone like me. I'm sure you've had your fair share of pain."

By now, rumors about Sewell and Greta had begun to spread around the village. Sewell's father didn't seem too pleased about it, but Sewell's mother had magnanimously accepted their friendship, knowing it was Greta who had given her son the cough drops. His mother had also been the one to teach Sewell the recipes for the lasagnas and financiers he gave Greta.

The kids in the village had punched him twice now, saying that he was pathetic to be led around by a witch. They jeered at him and sometimes acted violently towards him, knowing that Sewell would never tell the adults what they did.

Sewell simply wanted them and his father to understand, one day. He wanted them to understand that Greta was really wonderful, that she was a hardworking girl, and that no one had the right to discriminate against her or mock her.

"Huh, why? I always have loads of fun with you. It's way more fun being with you than anyone else."

"Yeah, but I..." Greta bit her tongue and looked down. Sewell gave her a big grin.

"But yeah, it's true that you're stubborn and rude, you grind your teeth when you're mad, and you glare daggers at me."

Greta looked up and scowled at Sewell. "If you've got so much to complain about, then why are you still here?"

"No, you're wrong! I'm not complaining—I find all those things about you wonderful."

Sewell took Greta's cold hand in his own and looked up at the sky. It didn't look like snow would fall today. Their breath left their mouths in little puffs of steam, disappearing into the winter sky.

"Let's go looking for it, Greta."

"For what?"

"For a witch village."

Sewell could sense Greta's discomfort.

"Wherever you are, how wonderful you are remains the same," Sewell went on. "But you want to go there, don't you? To

somewhere where other people like you live."

"Witch villages aren't found so easily."

"You never know. Maybe if we go together, we'll find it just like that." Sewell paused. "But to be honest, to me, it would be okay if we didn't manage to find it either."

"What?"

"If we can't, then we can just start our own village somewhere! Then we can save people who are all alone. Then it'll get bigger and bigger as more people come!"

"The young master has admirable dreams, huh?"

"Not really. I'm just... I'm desperate to come up with ways to keep you with me. This is a boring village full of adults. I don't know when a treasure like you might up and vanish."

Greta couldn't stop herself from shaking. "I told you before! Don't say sappy stuff with such a straight face!"

"Ow!"

Sewell noticed a sweet fragrance coming from Greta's fist as it struck him. It smelled like the sweets he'd made her.

As Greta playfully chased him around, Sewell laughed from the bottom of his stomach. Before long, Greta found herself laughing along.

The two of them continued to spend time together. Unfortunately, their days weren't full of nothing but bliss. Despite having recovered, Sewell's housekeeper still spoke poorly of Greta. Other villagers turned their noses up at her every time she walked by. Sewell confronted them, but often ended up getting beaten up because of it.

Greta nursed Sewell back to health with tears in her eyes every time this happened. So that she wouldn't cry, Sewell simply announced that his dream was to become a muscly tough guy, but this made Greta cackle with laughter. It stung just a little.

On another day, Sewell was heading towards Greta's shack. The cart he was wheeling had extra lumber from his family's business—he wanted to renovate Greta's house to make it easier to live in.

"Greta! You home?" he called, but there was no reply. Thinking it

strange, Sewell headed to the back of the house, where Greta was squatting down muttering to herself.

"'Weather ain't too bad, huh?' No, that's not right... 'Hello! The weather's great today!' Hee hee... Oh ho ho... 'You're looking as thickheaded as ever.' No, no, no! 'You're pretty cool, you know?' Ngh... This sucks, I'm no good at this at all. If only there was, I dunno, a seminar or something where I could learn how to bewitch him..."

"Greta, what're you doing?"

"Wagah!" Greta exclaimed, making a rather unique sound. She shot up and turned to him, her face red with anger. "You blockhead! Don't scare me like that!"

"S-Sorry! You just seemed like you were having fun."

Yet again, Greta ended up chasing Sewell around. Unfortunately for Sewell, he wasn't so light on his feet, so Greta caught him quickly.

"The pinch punishment is in order for any who dare creep up on me!"

"Noooo!"

So their usual banter went. By the way, Greta's pinching hurt more than any punches did.

Rubbing his sore cheeks, Sewell broached the topic again.

"So what were you doing earlier? Some kind of game?"

"Shut up. Forget everything you saw. Got it?"

"Loud and clear," Sewell said, nodding furiously, Greta's hands wrapped around his throat. There was no way he could actually forget, but agreeing seemed like his only option here.

Greta was a little taller than before, perhaps partly thanks to the food and snacks Sewell prepared for her. A wave of relief passed over Sewell as he thought of this.

Not only that, Greta had started demanding a lot of money from the villagers who came to her for her concoctions. This was because she had noticed that whether she charged them a little or a lot, their attitude towards her didn't change. They grumbled and complained as they purchased the high-quality medicines she spent so much effort creating. Of course, Sewell's housekeeper was among their

number.

At that moment, there was a loud bark. Greta pursed her lips as she noticed a large dog panting near the wagon.

"Ugh, you brought your mutt along again?"

"Yeah. And she's not a mutt—she's Candy!"

"Tch, she's a mangy mutt..."

As Greta turned her head away with a huff, Candy growled quietly with teeth bared.

Although Greta and Candy were mutually not on good terms, Sewell loved them both, so he wanted them to get along. That was the main reason he brought Candy when he came to hang out with Greta.

"Aha! I know!" Greta suddenly shouted. She pulled a wicked grin, as she always did when chancing upon an idea. "That's it! That's *it*! I know the exact potion to use!"

"G-Greta, what's all this?"

Greta pointed at the confused Sewell, and announced with a big grin, "Just you wait, Sewell. I'm going to make you all mine, and I know just what I need to do it!"

Sewell could only watch as Greta clattered back inside. Left alone, he sighed.

"Oh, Greta. I've long since been yours..."

This naive girl had yet to realize that her beautiful smiles already captured the heart of her friend every single day.

Candy nuzzled up to the blushing Sewell, and barked happily.

Extra Story 2: Detective Lottie Is on the Case, Special Episode

Thunder rumbled in the distance as a storm whipped around the Snowflower Palace—a grand building that had been built for the king's beloved daughter, the Fifth Princess.

The wind was so violent that it was dangerous to go outside. It seemed as if even the cows in the fields were about to be blown away. The conditions were perfect...for a locked-room mystery. But there were very few who could have been present when the incident occurred.

"Lottie, this may be your hardest case so far."

"Quite. To think I would be faced with such a gruesome case so soon after returning to the Snowflower Palace."

Where a detective goes, a case follows—such is the rule. However, it was beyond Lottie's imagination to think that one would have occurred in her very home.

Lottie creased her well-shaped brow and whispered introspectively to herself.

"Who would dare commit the grave crime of murder? Mark my words—Detective Lottie will lift the veil on this mystery!"

A few hours beforehand...

Charlotte was stuck inside due to the inclement weather. Cecily was visiting as she often did, and the pair of them were enjoying some after-dinner tea, prepared by Maria, in the dining room.

Today, Zeke, Alphonse, and Cyril were on guard duty for the princess. All the same, it was highly unlikely that any bandits would attack the palace on a day like this, and due to this, the knights were in a far more relaxed mood than usual.

Having finished her tea, Charlotte linked her arm with Cecily's and

headed to a bedroom, accompanied by Maria. The weather was too terrible for Cecily to head back home to her hut, so they had arranged for her to stay in the Snowflower Palace again. Due to Cecily's fear of thunder and lightning, the pair were going to sleep in the same bed, a prospect which excited Charlotte.

Cyril was following a short distance behind. The shifts for the night had been decided such that Cyril would take watch until late at night, Alphonse would take over in the hours as the day changed, and Zeke would man the dawn shift.

Due to their responsibility to take care of their wyverns and the possibility that they might be asked to ride them at any time, the Celestial Knight Brigade never performed all-night vigils. They completed their guard duties in shifts, and rested in the break room when off duty.

Having finished washing themselves and changing into their nightwear, Cecily and Charlotte settled down into the same bed. Charlotte's beloved four-poster was a king-size bed, large enough for them both to roll about on, so the pair spread out and enjoyed the space.

The two girls had an endless supply of things to talk about during a sleepover. To distract Cecily from the storm outside, Charlotte chatted in a lively manner about various things, but soon her excitement turned to exhaustion.

Before she knew it, her eyelids were closed, and the gentle breathing that came with sleep filled the room.

"Gyaaaaaaaagh!"

...That was, until an earsplitting, animalistic scream cut across the silent palace.

Charlotte leapt up and looked around.

Cecily was gone. Had she been caught up in something terrible? As worry engulfed Charlotte, Maria came running into the room.

"Lady Charlotte!"

"Maria!"

By Charlotte's command, Maria got the princess changed into her detective outfit in three seconds flat. Charlotte looked up at the clock. It was 2 a.m. sharp.

“What’s going on?”

It wasn’t just Cecily—Cyril was missing too. This was concerning, but the pensive Lottie decided it would be more prudent to find the source of that terrible scream.

“Lottie, I believe the scream came from this direction,” Maria said, leading the detective to the bathroom. It took less than five minutes for them to arrive there.

In the corridor in front of the bathroom was a large pool of blood, and in the middle of it, a man lying face up. It was a man Lottie knew well.

“No... What happened to the captain’s loins?!”

Lottie couldn’t believe what she was seeing. This was the powerful captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade, Zeke Stein! To think he had fallen prey to something...

Cecily, then Alphonse, and finally Cyril came running up to Lottie, who was standing frozen. All of them were struck speechless by the scene before them. Maria gently placed her coat upon Cecily’s shuddering shoulders.

“What happened? Cyril, we need to get Zeke to the infirmary.”

“Y-You got it. I’ll go get a stretcher!”

Alphonse and Cyril pulled themselves together and rushed off. Lottie eyed them as they left before surveying the scene.

Zeke was lying in a pool of blood. His blue outfit was stained with the stuff, which had even splattered his gold aiguillette.

“The murder weapon’s not here. I suppose the perp took it with them?”

“There’s too much blood to ascertain where his wound may be,” Maria added.

What a puzzling situation. Was it really possible for a wound to have bled this much without being easy to locate?

Soon, Alphonse and Cyril returned and carried Zeke to the infirmary. After they had done so and then returned, Lottie made a shocking announcement.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news at such a traumatic moment, but Cecily, Alphonse’s loins, and Cyril’s loins? I have narrowed down the suspects to you three.”

“You can’t be serious...”

All three were dumbfounded by the detective’s deduction.

“Why just us three? There are lots of people who work in the Snowflower Palace,” Alphonse said.

“And why aren’t you counting yourself and Maria among the suspects?” Cyril added.

“Very well, allow me to explain,” Lottie said. She stood on tiptoes and started writing on the blackboard that she had asked to be brought over. “First of all, Maria and I can vouch for each other with our alibis. Maria and I spoke in my bedroom mere moments after that scream, which I believe occurred when the captain’s loins collapsed. Not only that, it took us a whole five minutes to reach his location, even running. Well—I suppose there is the possibility that Maria and I are conspiring together and conducted this heinous crime as partners, but surely it would have been more fruitful in such a case to ask other maids to vouch for us, no?”

Alphonse nodded. More witnesses would have been better in that case. This fact seemed to imply that it wasn’t likely that Maria and Lottie were behind it all.

“Next, we can strike off the other maids from the list of suspects. They work together and thus all have alibis. In addition, none of the children have left their rooms, or so it seems.” Lottie looked over at the three suspects. “However, the three of you were all acting alone at the time of the crime! Explain in turn what you were doing when this awful incident took place!”





"Okay, I suppose I'll go first," Cecily said, cutting through the silence, her face red. "I couldn't get to sleep with all the thunder outside, so I slipped out of Lottie's bedroom and headed to the kitchen to have a hot cup of tea. My cup should still be there, so that should verify my claim. You see, I left it there when I heard that scream and came running."

Next was Alphonse, who spoke with his brow furrowed.

"As for my alibi... Zeke would be able to vouch for me, but, well. Anyway, I was resting in the break room when I heard that scream. I sped out of the room, wondering why Zeke wasn't in bed, and headed to the bathroom."

Finally, Cyril.

"I was on duty, guarding you, Princess Charlotte, but I thought I saw a suspicious figure outside. I was heading to see if anyone was there, but then I heard the scream from a distance. I puzzled about what to do, but then decided to follow the scream."

"A suspicious figure, you say," Lottie said, with a sigh. "The fact that we found the captain's loins lying on his back meant that the perp was standing in front of him. This is without a doubt a crime committed by someone the captain's loins knew and trusted. Whether this 'suspicious figure' exists or not is irrelevant to the murder case at hand, I'm afraid."

Everyone present pulled uncomfortable expressions.

"Hold it, it's not a murder case—he's not dead!" Alphonse exclaimed, after a short silence. Zeke may have lost blood, but he was resting in the infirmary, simply unconscious. However, Lottie was too deep in thought to hear him.

"Mr. Cee Rill?"

"Y-Yes? What is it?"

Cyril's whole body started quivering in fear as Lottie called his name.

"You were not present on our trip to the witch village. Did you kill the captain's loins out of frustration about this?"

"O-Of course not! I would never harm the captain for such a childish reason!"

Cyril's face burned red with the accusation, but the detective was

unrelenting.

"I've noticed something else. Your hair. It's wet."

"Th-That's because I forgot to dry it after washing it earlier! My hair's short, so sometimes I forget."

"If that wasn't enough—your glasses. They're different from the ones you were wearing a few hours ago."

"Well, I..." Tears threatened to spill out of Cyril's eyes. Everyone looked at him with suspicion. He bit down on his lip and spoke. "Okay, I'll come clean. I tried to head back to the dorms. The story about a suspicious figure was a lie."

Lottie stared at him with narrowed eyes.

"You wanted to head back to the dorms in this terrible storm, so late at night? Pray tell, why?"

"Because I suddenly hit upon an idea for a new novel!"

"Really? That's great!" Lottie couldn't control her excitement. A new novel from Mr. Cee Rill, the famed writer of romances? Her heart leapt with joy at the prospect! "So, what's it about?"

"Lottie, is now really the time?" her assistant Maria said. Lottie coughed lightly.

"Ahem, very well then. You hit upon a new idea and wanted to head back to the dorms. Why did you need to go back?"

"I always write my ideas in my notebook with my favorite pen. However, for some reason I forgot both of them today. It was stupid of me, but I wanted to go back and fetch them from the dorms." Cyril's expression was full of regret. "As soon as I opened the doors to leave, the storm blew in, causing my hair to get wet. Not only that, a sudden clap of thunder shocked me so badly that I dropped my glasses and ended up stepping on them. The only saving grace was that I'd brought a spare pair."

"Come on, man! You brought a spare pair of glasses, but not your pen and notebook?" Alphonse's rebuke was fair enough, but, well, everyone made mistakes.

"I see. Thank you for telling us all. So...what's the story going to be about?"

"Well, in the shock of stepping on my glasses, I forgot."

"What? Nooo!"

"Lottie. The case," Maria said.

Wiping her tears away, Lottie went back to the matter at hand.

"All right, Mr. Cee Rill is no longer a suspect."

"Your reasons?"

"Well, he's not the sort of person to commit murder in the first place. His hands exist for the sake of writing his wonderful stories, not for murder."

"Thank you, Princess Charlotte," Cyril said, evidently moved.

"Pay it no heed. However, right now I'm Lottie. Please get that right."

"You're the best, Lottie! Aha! I think I've just thought of an idea for a new novel!"

"Hey! This is blatant favoritism, Princess!" Alphonse said, evidently upset.

"No it isn't! It's a deduction that's fueled by a teeny bit of favoritism," Lottie said, cutting down Alphonse's argument in an instant. "Just joking. I've actually known who the culprit is all along." The group fell silent at the detective's proclamation. "So if the culprit could own up now...for the sake of their own good name."

And in fact, a voice did reply.

"It was me, Lottie." Cecily had fallen to her knees and started to sob. "I did that to Zeke...with my very own hands."

"Well done for coming clean, Cecily." Lottie gave Cecily's shoulder an encouraging pat. "You said you poured a hot cup of tea, but when I got Maria to verify your claim, your tea had long since gone cold. In fact, you were drinking your tea and intended to use the bathroom when you bumped into Zeke. Correct? That's when this tragedy occurred."

"Yes, it's just as you say. I...I didn't think seeing me in a nightgown would cause Zeke to have a nosebleed so severe that he passed out!"

Cecily's face was bright red.

Yes, it was just as Cecily had said. The pair had bumped into one another. From all her tossing and turning, Cecily's hair and clothes were untidy, and the sleeves of her nightgown were riding up. Not only that, she was wearing nothing else—no cardigan or sweater on

top of it. And Zeke had seen his girlfriend in this suggestive state. He'd been nearby, and, as Cecily had approached, a sudden peal of lightning had caused her figure to appear in his eyes. This scene was all too much for him to bear, and he had collapsed there and then. The icing on the cake of Lottie's deduction had been Cecily's relatively calm reaction to the whole affair. If Zeke had truly been attacked by someone, Cecily would have attacked the culprit without question instead of allowing Lottie to lead the investigation.

Thus was the truth of the case.

"Cecily."

It was Zeke. He had returned from the infirmary. Cecily ran over to him with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Zeke, I'm so sorry! I'm really sorry!"

"It's fine, Cecily."

"But it's my fault! I'm the one who said, 'This nightgown's so thin—I wonder what would happen if you held me right now,' after all!"

"That's true. I need to stop those wicked, bewitching lips, or I won't feel at ease!"

Unable to bear being under Zeke's hazel eyes any longer, Cecily collapsed into Zeke's arms. He easily lifted her light body and held her like a princess.

"Let's go somewhere we can be alone, Cecily!"

"Let's!"

"Sorry for all the commotion."

"Sorry!"

And so the ridiculous couple who had caused this whole affair sauntered off without a care in the world.

"A-And with that, case closed!" The scene had caused even Lottie to flush terribly. "The next case awaits—let us away, Maria!"

"I'm sorry, but I have some work to attend to, so I'll be taking my leave, Lottie."

Surprised but undeterred, Lottie turned to the person who had been her assistant before Maria. With his name finally cleared, she could finally accept him back. She called out with a levity in her voice.

"Alphonse's loins—I know you left, but you're back as my

assistant.”

“Uh, I didn’t leave? But whatever. I shall accompany you to wherever you may head, my lady.”

“Very good!”

Although Lottie was in the highest spirits, Alphonse let out a yawn from behind her.

“First stop is bed, I think. It’s pretty late.”

“Good point!”

Alphonse’s yawns were infectious, and Lottie readjusted her beret as she headed to her bedroom.

Although the matter tonight had come to a close, this wouldn’t be the final case for Detective Lottie...

Afterword

This is something that happened the other month, but while I was writing, my side table which my keyboard was on collapsed, colliding directly with my hip. There was a huge blue bruise, and it hurt for about a week afterwards, but it convinced me to get a new table, and along with it, a new chair.

This new chair's cool because not only does it have a headrest, it also has waist and lower back support. I've grown pretty comfortable in it.

I'm in it right now, tapping away at my keyboard. An author's eyes and hips are essential, after all. I ask all my readers to take care of your bodies too! It's important to go out for walks and to build up muscle strength. Getting stronger, then eventually becoming quick enough to evade any falling side tables is my goal.

Anyway, this started off with a little anecdote about my table, but Volume 2 of *Accidentally in Love* is finished. I hope you enjoyed this illustrated volume.

When Volume 1 came out, DRE Novels produced this wonderful clip where they managed to hire two famous voice actors whom I'm sure many people stan. It's been a really wonderful experience for me. Two great voice actors lent their voices, with Yui Ishikawa voicing Cecily and Wataru Hatano voicing Zeke. Their performances are really wonderful, and I felt a bit of embarrassment, thinking that I'd made these pros say such silly things, but at the end of the day, it isn't my fault—it's the fault of the lovey-dovey Cecily and Zeke. I felt I could hear their voices as I wrote this volume, which was something that brought me joy.

If thoughts like "What's this about 'stanning' voice actors?" or "Oh, I'm a fan of those voice actors!" have ever crossed your mind, rush on over to the bookstore and get yourself a copy of Volume 1 with a little bonus attached to it. If you can't find one in your local

bookstore, it would make me really happy if you asked them to order some. I'm sure they'll be drawn into this sweet world too.

Finally, I'd like to give some acknowledgments.

Thank you to my illustrator, Eda. Cain first appears in this volume, but Eda really took a shine to him, and being Cain's creator, that made me really happy. When I received the rough draft for the cover, I was so surprised to see Zeke wasn't there! That's a really funny moment that I won't forget. Thank you for all your wonderful illustrations in this volume too.

Thank you to everyone who has picked up a copy of this book. I really am grateful from the bottom of my heart. I really hope you enjoyed reading it.

I hope we meet again somewhere soon.


2
Harunadon
[ILLUSTRATION]
Eda
Accidentally in Love:
The Witch, the Knight,
and the Love Potion Slipup


ZEKE STEIN
Cecily's boyfriend. An elite knight who is captain of the Celestial Knight Brigade.
SEWELL
Cecily's father, who dotes on his beloved daughter.
CECILY RAMPS
A purehearted witch who has found love.
GRETA
Cecily's mother. A free-spirited woman who does as she pleases.
"Y-Y-You have no right to call me 'father'!"
"Please, I beg of you to give your blessing to allow me to marry your daughter."
"Mom, I want to marry Zeke!"
"Do you now? Sounds good to me."


CAIN LAHART
Cecily's childhood friend, who harbors feelings for her.
"I wanted to talk to you about something, Cecily. From ten years ago. I asked you to make a promise with me, remember?"
"From ten years ago?"
"This is for you, from me. To celebrate our reunion."
"Oh, Cain... I love you!"

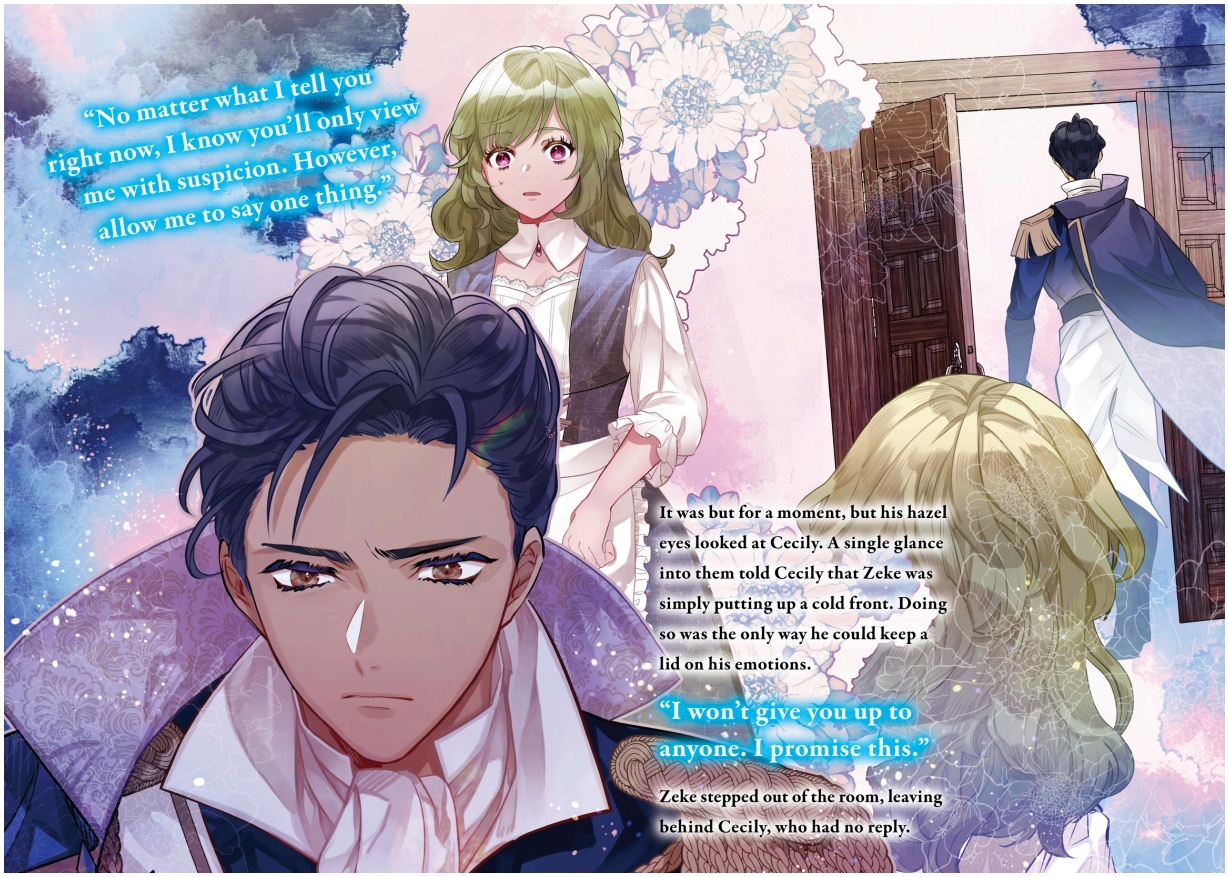

"No matter what I tell you right now, I know you'll only view me with suspicion. However, allow me to say one thing."
It was but for a moment, but his hazel eyes looked at Cecily. A single glance into them told Cecily that Zeke was simply putting up a cold front. Doing so was the only way he could keep a lid on his emotions.
"I won't give you up to anyone. I promise this."
Zeke stepped out of the room, leaving behind Cecily, who had no reply.

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Accidentally in Love: The Witch, the Knight, and the Love Potion Slipup Volume 2
by Harunadon

Translated by Arthur Miura Edited by Momo

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