

The witches of Galree

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Chapter 1

The speech

"Ulrich! Where the hell is he. Ulrich!"

Bruno looked around the tavern, and finally found Ulrich sitting on the grass outside, drinking alone.

"There you are. What are you doing here?"

"Hey Bruno. Just thinking."

"Come in, brother. Let's have some fun."

"Nah, I'd rather stay here."

"Alright, then."

Bruno sat on the grass beside his old friend. The moon shone brightly on both, highlighting the contrast between Bruno's pale skin and Ulrich's darker one.

"What's wrong?" Bruno asked.

"I don't know, I'm just not feeling like it today."

"Ulrich, you're 'not feeling like it' every time."

"I know."

"Look, you've got everything a man could dream of. Everyone admires you. You're the second best swordsman in this kingdom!"

"The *second* best?"

"We all know who the best is."

"So why have I defeated you in last year's tournament?"

"That was just luck. I've defeated you the year before."

"*That* was just luck."

"Look, the point is, everyone would want to be in your place, Ulrich. Why aren't you happy?"

"I don't know, Bruno. I just feel that there's something missing in my life. Something important."

"I feel like I've heard this before."

"I've always felt this way. It just gets worse from time to time."

"Honestly, the only time I remember you being actually happy is when we were kids."

"Good times."

"We're much better off today though, aren't we? Our lives have only improved, but you only get sadder. I don't understand."

"Frankly, I don't understand it either..."

"So you feel like you're missing something?"

"Yes."

"I think you just need a woman. Come on, I'm sure the ladies in the tavern would love to meet you."

"...That's not it, Bruno. Is that all you think about?"

"Well, I do think a lot about women."

"Man, you're a lost cause..."

Bruno laughed. "Hey, I'm trying to be nice here."

"I'm sorry. I appreciate your concern, brother. You go back to the tavern and have some fun. I'd rather stay here."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. "

"You're okay?"

"Don't worry, I'm fine."

"If you say so..."

Bruno went back in, while Ulrich gazed at the moon.

* * *

A few days later, Ulrich was walking around town, wearing a hood as he usually did, when he noticed a commotion nearby.

He approached the scene and saw a small group of people booing at a white blonde woman who was reading a speech from a scroll.

"...from appearances, we can't judge..."

Ulrich tried to listen in spite of the people's noise.

"...one is born... a male body, but a woman's..."

The woman stopped her speech to stare at the crowd, and sighed before rolling up the scroll and walking away.

Ulrich distanced himself from the group and tried to run after her.

"Hey, lady! Excuse me," Ulrich said to someone he had just bumped into. "Lady!"

The woman noticed someone was calling her and looked back.

"I'm sorry," Ulrich said, "I saw what just happened there. What were you trying to say?"

The lady gave him a suspicious look. "Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ulrich replied, and took off his hood.

"You look familiar," she remarked after examining his face.

"Yes, you may have seen me before. I'm a sword fighter."

"Oh, I remember you. You're—"

"Shh!" Ulrich asked, and put his hood back on.

"Oh, of course. You can't be seen talking to the likes of me."

"That's not it."

"Well, I'm honored that even someone as important as you came here to mock me. Now, if you excuse me," she said, and began to leave.

"Wait!"

The lady turned around to face him again.

"Look, I'm sorry you were treated that way," Ulrich explained.

"I'm just trying to understand what you were saying. Something about a male body, but a woman's... what?"

She hesitated to answer.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," Ulrich assured. "Or mock you. I promise."

"...A male body, but a woman's soul," she replied. "Some people are born that way."

"Really? Do you know someone like that?"

"Well, there's myself. And a couple more."

"Wait, what? You don't look like a man to me."

"I'm not a man."

"But you were born with a male body?"

"Yes."

"But how? I mean..."

"Well, thanks to that potion."

"There's a potion that turns you into a woman?!"

"Well, it turns your body into a woman's body. Your spirit will never change."

"So you make potions? Are you, like, a witch?"

The lady shrugged. "I suppose that's what they call us..."

"And that potion, how does it work?"

"Why are you asking all those questions?"

"I don't know. I'm just curious, I guess. I'd like to learn more."

"I'm not sure if there's anything I can teach to a great swordsman like you."

"Will you stop that? Look, I may be considered great and what-not, but the truth is I'm just a fool with a sword. And you clearly know something I don't, so can you teach me what you know?"

The woman pondered for a while.

"If you really want to know more," she said at last, "I guess I should take you to Julia. Would you like to?"

"Who is that?"

"Julia is our leader. I'm going back to the farm, so you can come along and talk to her if you want."

"I don't even know who you are."

"I'm Laura. And you're Ulrich, right?"

"That's right."

"Pleased to meet you."

"And how do I know you're not preparing an ambush?"

"Well, you don't know me, so I understand it if you don't trust me. But even if I were an actual thief, I'd have to be pretty stupid to target a famous swordsman like you."

"..."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to."

"No. I'll go with you."

"Then go get your horse and meet me at the south exit of the town. It should take an hour and a half to get there if you're ready to go fast."

"Um, okay."

"Well, get going then!"

Ulrich ran off to the inn where was staying, took his horse and went to the meeting place, where Laura was waiting with her own horse.

"Finally," Laura exclaimed. "Let's go!"

Without another word, she rushed forward; Ulrich followed her closely behind. After riding at full speed for quite a while, Laura pointed at something in the horizon.

"There it is. Welcome to the Galree farm."

Chapter 2

The farm

After arriving, Laura guided Ulrich to the stable, where both left their horses. A tall black woman showed up to greet them.

"Hey princess," Laura called.

"Welcome back, darling," the lady replied. "And I see you've brought someone along."

"You must be Julia," Ulrich said. "Pleased to meet you."

"Not really," the woman replied.

"Ulrich," Laura said, "this is my wife, Vivian."

"Your... wife?"

"That is correct," Vivian replied. "You look surprised. Perhaps you didn't know a woman can have a wife instead of a husband?"

"I've heard about it," Ulrich said. "But you weren't also born with a male body, were you?"

"I was. Everyone here was."

"But hold on, how come do you all have feminine names then? Those aren't your real names, are they?"

"It's how we call ourselves, and how everyone calls us. That's as real as a name can be."

"Please excuse him, princess," Laura said to Vivian. "Ulrich, you don't think about what it's like being on the receiving end of your own questions, do you?"

"...You're right. That was very inconsiderate of me. I'm sorry."

"Never mind that," Vivian replied. "You're looking for Julia, right? She should be in the dining room with Lily."

"Is lunch ready?" Laura asked.

"It's still cooking."

"Shall we?"

The two led Ulrich into a small house; inside, there was a dining room with four seats. Sitting directly across the door was a middle-aged black woman; to her right was a young, pale and somewhat androgynous-looking woman.

"Hey ladies," Laura called.

"Hi Laura," replied the younger woman. "Wait, is that..."

"Pleased to meet you," Ulrich said. "I'm—"

"We know who you are," interrupted the older woman. "The real question is, why are you here?"

"...Ulrich, this is Julia," Laura said.

"So? What brings you here?"

"Well, you see," Ulrich replied, "I happened to hear some of Laura's speech in town, and asked her to tell me more, so she brought me here. I thought it was fascinating."

"*Fascinating*," Julia repeated. "So you came here to gaze upon us like exotic creatures at the zoo?"

"T-that's not what I meant!"

Julia stood up and approached Ulrich with a serious face, staring deeply into his eyes. She remained that way for quite a while... before bursting into laughter.

"I'm just messing around, Ulrich," Julia explained. "I can tell you have good intentions. Pleased to meet you."

"Julia..." Laura muttered, scratching her head.

"You'll end up giving us a heart attack one of these days," Vivian pondered.

"Don't worry," Julia replied, "you're not gonna die anytime soon. And to celebrate having a famous sword fighter with us..."

She regained her serious expression. "...I challenge you to a duel."

"...What?"

"Don't worry, we'll use wooden swords. I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"You don't want *me* to get hurt?"

"What's the matter? You're not scared, are you?"

"You must be joking."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"Alright, then..."

Julia went inside and came back with two wooden swords, passing one to Ulrich.

"Follow me," Julia asked, and went to the open field outside the house. Ulrich and the others followed.

"Well then. En garde!"

Ulrich didn't want to humiliate an older woman, so he tried going easy on her, but soon realized his mistake as he was struck by a blow that would have been fatal with an actual sword.

"Whoa!" Ulrich exclaimed. "You're way better than I thought!"

"Is that all you can do?" Julia asked.

"I wouldn't have lost if I knew you were this good!"

"Talk is cheap. Come at me again!"

This time, Ulrich fought with all his might; a fierce battle arose and went on for a long time, until Ulrich finally disarmed Julia.

"That's it!" Julia exclaimed, panting. "That's more like it. Well done."

"You're incredibly skilled," Ulrich remarked.

"Do you understand why you lost the first round, but won the second?"

"I knew better than to underestimate you the second time."

"Never let your guard down in a duel, no matter who your opponent is. It could cost your life."

"I'll remember that."

"Well, I've really worked up an appetite. Ulrich, will you join us for lunch?"

"Uh, yes, please."

"Lily?" Julia called.

The youngest woman, who was sitting with Julia before and now seemed absorbed in a daze, snapped out of it.

"Oh! Yes, lunch should be almost ready by now," Lily replied. "I'll take it out before it burns!"

Lily and Laura ran back inside; the others walked there. By the time Ulrich got in, a large pot was already placed on top of the dining table.

"Has it burned?" Vivian asked.

"No, the timing was perfect," Laura replied.

"Thank you for showing us a breathtaking duel, mister Ulrich," Lily said, bowing. "It's truly an honor to meet you."

"You must be Lily, right?" Ulrich asked. "Pleased to meet you as well."

"It's hard to believe we have such a remarkable guest with us. If I had known, I would have made a special meal..."

"Thank you, but there's no need for that."

"There are only four chairs," Julia remarked. "I'll go get another one."

"Say, Julia is really something, isn't she?" Laura asked Ulrich after she had left.

"She's not what I was expecting," he replied. "At all."

"Don't be fooled by her manners, Ulrich," Vivian said. "Julia is extremely wise."

"She has an amazing ability to read people," Laura added.

"She always talked to me as if I were an old friend..." Lily pondered.

"But I'm curious," Laura said. "What were you expecting?"

"A boring old woman, of course," Julia replied. She had returned with a chair. "More importantly, lunch is served; help yourselves."

Everyone took their seats. Ulrich served himself and reluctantly took a bite.

"Hey, this is really good," Ulrich said, and immediately started having more.

"I'm truly glad you enjoy it, mister Ulrich," Lily replied.

"Just 'Ulrich' will do."

"Lily is by far the best addition to our group," Julia said. "No offense, Vivian."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Vivian replied.

"Well I don't," Laura said, "I prefer my princess. Wait, do I count as an addition too?"

"You own this farm, Laura," Julia replied.

"What do you mean?" Ulrich asked. "I thought you owned the place, Julia. Aren't you their leader?"

"You didn't explain much, did you, darling?" Vivian asked Laura.

"Hey, I was worried we'd be late for lunch," Laura replied.

"For the record," Julia said, "I never asked to be called the leader of anything."

"You're the one who taught us about the feminizing potion," Vivian replied.

"You know far more about potions than me at this point, though," Julia said to Vivian.

"By 'feminizing potion' you mean the one that turns a male body into a female body?" Ulrich asked. "I'm curious, but I don't know if I can ask..."

"Ask away," Julia said.

"How does it work? And how is it made?"

"I'm not sure if we should discuss that second one while we're eating," Laura remarked.

"Don't worry, dear," Vivian replied, "I'll just give him the basic idea. You see, Ulrich, the potion has the same effects as female puberty, but on a male body."

"I see."

"And it seems female puberty is brought about by exposure to something the human body produces... For the lack of a better word, let's call it the female substance."

"Okay."

"It seems the female substance is roughly the same in some other animals, so we can extract it from them when their bodies are making a large amount of it."

"Okay..."

"And that seems to happen during pregnancy. Specifically, we use pregnant mares, since there's plenty of them here."

"So you sacrifice pregnant mares to make the potion?"

"No sacrifice is needed."

"...I don't get it. Where's the magic in all this?"

Julia laughed, while Laura and Vivian stared at each other.

"Wait a minute," Ulrich said, "so you're telling me there's *no* magic involved? Aren't you witches?"

"That's just what people call us," Julia answered, "because they know nothing about potions."

"So you don't have flying brooms?"

"Ulrich, I wouldn't be riding a horse if I had a flying broom," Laura replied.

"You don't have a black cat that you talk to?"

"Given how cats are, even if they could understand, I don't think they would bother to answer," Vivian replied.

"You don't even have large pointy hats?"

"That doesn't sound very cute," Lily pondered.

"...I'm disappointed."

"You can only blame yourself for believing in those stories," Julia replied.

"But even without magic," Ulrich said after pondering for a while, "it's amazing that it's possible to make such a potion. Who even had this idea?"

"I wish I could take credit," Julia replied, "but I simply learned it from my predecessor. She, in turn, learned it from her predecessor, and so on."

"So you don't know who created it."

"It's impossible to know."

"What's even more impressive," Vivian remarked, "is that even though I've been looking for quite a while, I couldn't find any better alternatives to this potion."

"Better alternatives?" Ulrich repeated. "Doesn't that potion work well?"

"It does, but it's frustratingly slow. Since it mimics puberty, the potion takes years to work..."

"Oh, it's not instantaneous?"

Lily looked sad.

"Don't worry, Lily," Laura said. "It's just a matter of time."

"Thank you, Laura."

"What's the matter?" Ulrich asked.

"I haven't had the potion long enough," Lily replied, "so I still look like a man..."

"I don't think so," Ulrich replied.

"You don't?"

"You still have some, uh, masculine features, but I think you're pretty."

"It's very kind of you to say that."

"No, I mean it. Like, I know it sounds like I'm just being polite, but—"

"Really?" Lily's face brightened up.

"Well, yes."

"To think someone as great as you would say—"

"Um, Lily," Ulrich interrupted.

"Yes?"

"I can tell you admire me, and I appreciate it, but this is a little bit weird."

"Oh. Um, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. But I'd rather if you just treated me like an ordinary person, you know."

Lily sank into her thoughts.

"Um, Lily?" Ulrich called.

"I understand," she replied at last.

"I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have—"

"No, I understand. I really do. All I ever wanted from other people was to be seen as an ordinary woman. It's strange, but I guess we have something in common..."

Ulrich also began to ponder.

"It's clearly not the same thing, though," Laura said. "He gets praised while we get shamed. You've seen how they treated me while I was trying to make that speech," she said to Ulrich.

"Absolutely," Ulrich agreed, "I have it way easier than you all."

"And yet," Julia pondered, "reputation can be a burden in its own right. When people expect so much from you, their expectations become your own, and you lose sight of what you want for yourself."

"...How would you know that?" Ulrich asked.

"I was a famous sword fighter as well, when I was younger."

"Given how well you fought, I'm not surprised to hear that. But you gave that up so you could be..."

"...Myself."

"That much is true for all of us," Laura pondered. "People expected us to be men, but we're simply not. We had no choice but to break free from their expectations."

"Breaking free from people's expectations..." Ulrich repeated. "I wish I could do that."

"You don't like being a swordsman?" Lily asked.

"I do. Dueling truly makes me feel alive. But somehow I feel that what people think of me is something very different from what I am."

"And what would you say are, then?" Vivian asked.

"I don't know..."

"I don't think anyone one does," Julia said. "More importantly, what do you want?"

"I don't even know that much."

"Sooner or later," Julia replied, "just like we did, you too will need to figure that out."

Chapter 3

Windy night

"Focus, Ulrich! What's gotten to you?"

Bruno had once again disarmed him during practice.

"Sorry, Bruno. I don't know what's going on with me today."

"Your mind is elsewhere."

"Yeah, I can't stop thinking about what happened."

"With the witches?"

"I don't even know if I should call them that."

"It's not something you hear every day, that's for sure. But you can't even concentrate on training because of that?"

"Yeah, I know."

"...Ulrich."

"Yeah?"

"Are you... in love?"

"What?"

"With one of them. I mean, they're not... normal women, but—"

"If there's one thing I learned there, Bruno, is that they *are* normal women."

"...Well, are you?"

"It's not like that."

"You said there's four of them, right? At least one must be pretty."

"They're all pretty, but I'm not interested in any of them."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Man..."

"I know, I know. I'm a lost cause."

Ulrich thought for a while. "Well, there's a woman there—"

"Aha! I knew it."

"...She's old enough to be my mom, dude."

"Wow, I didn't know you were into that."

"Bruno!"

"I'm joking! Lighten up man, you're too serious."

"Actually, I think that's something she might say."

"I like her already. What's her name?"

"Julia."

"So, what about her?"

"They call her their leader. She's a little... *eccentric*. But everyone says she's really wise, and I've seen some of that myself. I think she might be able to help me out..."

"With what?"

"With finally figuring out what I want for my life."

"You're gonna ask advice... to a witch?"

"Yeah, I know it sounds crazy. You'd have to see her for yourself to understand."

"Alright then, but for now you should focus. You know this year's tournament is getting closer."

"..."

"Ulrich. You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?"

"I might be."

"You're not gonna participate?!"

"That's right."

"Ulrich! How can you say that?! We're swordsmen! This is what we do!"

"And what if that's not what I want to be, Bruno? Huh?!"

"Ulrich?"

"I'm going crazy, Bruno. With everything everyone wants me to be. I don't know what's wrong, but I need to find out. I *need* to change something in my life, or I'm actually gonna go insane..."

"...I understand."

"Bruno?"

"I'll trust your judgment on this one, Ulrich."

"...So you're okay with me not entering the tournament?"

"I mean, I'm shocked, but you're clearly not well, and let's be honest, you haven't been in a long time now. So maybe you're right. And I hope that Julia lady can help."

"I really wasn't expecting you to say that..."

"You're my main opponent, Ulrich, and this tournament will be a bore without you. But above all, you're my friend. I just wanna see you smile again like you used to when we were kids."

The two hugged.

"That means a lot, Bruno. Now, you'd better win for me!"

"That will be easy if you're not there..."

* * *

Laura went to see who had just arrived.

"Ulrich? Is that you?"

"Hello Laura. Is it a bad time? I can come back another day if you'd like."

"No, not at all. I'm surprised to see you again, though. I didn't think you'd come back."

"May I have a word with Julia?"

"Sure. Follow me."

Laura led Ulrich into the fields.

"Huh? She was here just a moment ago."

Ulrich felt a light tap on his shoulder.

"Looking for me?" Julia asked.

"You scared me!"

"It's good to see you, too."

Laura laughed. "Well, I have to tend to the mares now, so if you'll excuse me."

"I'm watering the plants," Julia said to Ulrich. "Here, help me out."

"Sure."

"So, what brings you back here?"

"I wanted to talk to you..."

"Go on."

"Well, I've been told that you have some kind of... ability to read people."

Julia shrugged. "Some people are easier to read than others."

"And me?"

"You're like an open book to me."

"Really? So... who am I?"

"There are plenty of people telling you that already. They say you're the great, remarkable swordsman, but you know better than to trust them, don't you?"

"...That's different."

"So if *I* were to tell you who are, would you listen?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, you shouldn't. Whatever it is other people think of you, it doesn't define who you are. That applies even to me."

"See? This is exactly why I came back."

"To be told that you're wrong?"

"I can tell you're wise, just like the others have told me. Look, I need your help. I have to figure out... well, a lot. Like who I am and what I really want. Can you help me?"

"I'm willing to, but despite what you think, there's only so much I can do. I can show you the way, but I can't walk for you. And I can't make the path much easier for you either."

"That's fair."

"You'll have to look inside yourself deeper and longer than you ever have. You'll be forced to face things that will truly shock you. There's nothing more terrifying than your own reflection, if you stare long enough."

"I don't care. I'm ready."

"No one is. But it's important to try anyway. This isn't a quick process, though."

"I figured that much..."

"I'll talk to Laura and see if she's okay with you staying here for a while. She may call me a leader or whatever, but she's the one who owns this place, so I need her permission."

"Of course."

"Well then."

"So..."

"So?"

"Now what?"

"Now, we water the plants."

* * *

"Wow, you're back!" Lily exclaimed.

"Hey Lily, it's good to see you again," Ulrich replied. "You too, Vivian."

"Hello Ulrich," Vivian replied. "I understand you'll be staying with us for a while."

"Oh, you will?" Lily asked.

"Well, if you'll allow me."

"As long as you do your share of work around here," Laura replied, "I have no problem with that."

"Naturally," Ulrich said. "So, what do I have to do?"

"You can just help each of us in turn, each day. Tomorrow you can help me out with the mares. Is that alright?"

"Sounds good. By the way, where's Julia?"

"She's probably gone to bed already. Speaking of which, let me show you where you'll stay."

Laura led Ulrich into a room inside the house.

"Well, here you go."

"Thank you again for letting me stay, Laura."

"No problem."

* * *

As the night fell, a chilling wind began its dreadful howl.

What was I thinking? Ulrich thought to himself. *I shouldn't have come here. They're witches! I'm sleeping in the same house as witches!*

Ulrich took a deep breath. *Okay, calm down. They said that's just what people call them. They're just ordinary women. They certainly look like it...*

But of course they said that! That's exactly what a witch would say! They wanted me to lower my guard... And I fell for it! Now they're gonna come in at any moment, in the dead of the night, and—

Ulrich heard the door begin to open; he watched with horror as a figure appeared at the door holding an oil lamp.

"Hello, Ulrich."

"J-Julia? Is that you?"

"Yes."

"W-what do you want?!"

"Time's up. I'm here to help you leave your mortal coil."

A chill ran through his body; Ulrich sprang up and ran to reach for his sword... while Julia burst into laughter.

"Oh, Ulrich. You really believe in anything, don't you."

"..."

"Let me guess. You're having seconds thoughts about coming here."

“...How would you know that?”

“It’s written all over your face. You look awfully scared now.”

“Did you just come here to mock me, or what?”

“I brought you this blanket. The wind is strong, I figured you might be feeling cold.”

“Oh. Um, that’s very thoughtful of you.”

“Forget that ‘witch’ crap and go get some sleep. We wake up early in this place.”

Chapter 4

Laura

"Ulrich! Wake up!"

"Ugh..."

"Come on, sleepyhead, wake up!"

"Okay, okay."

Ulrich opened his eyes and saw it was Laura.

"I guess you're not used to waking up this early, huh?"

"Yeah..."

"Come on, breakfast is served. We're waiting for you."

Laura left the room. Ulrich shook his head, got up and went to the dining room.

"Good morning, everyone," Ulrich said.

"Good morning," Lily replied.

"Did you sleep well?" Julia asked.

"I think you know the answer to that."

"Don't worry, you'll get used to our routine," Vivian said.

The breakfast continued in silence.

"Feeling awake now?" Laura asked.

"Yeah, I am."

"Come on then, let's check on the mares."

"Have *they* woken up?"

Laura took Ulrich to another stable, different from the one where he had left his horse.

"This stable is just for the mares," Laura explained. "You know, the ones we use to make our potions. The horses we use to travel are in the smaller one."

Ulrich started to tend to the mares.

"I see you need no explanation," Laura said.

"Yeah, I'm used to dealing with horses."

"Hey, are you alright? You look kind of sad."

"...I'm ashamed of myself."

"Huh? Why?"

"When you first brought me here, I thought it might be an ambush. And last night, I was so worried that... *something* would happen to me. All I did was mistrust you, even though you welcomed me in your house."

"I don't blame you. To be honest, I normally wouldn't let a near stranger stay here either."

"Really? Then why?"

"Julia assured me there would no problem."

"You all put a lot of faith in her."

"Of course. In the 12 years I've known her, she's never been wrong about a person's character. I swear, she has some sort of sixth sense..."

"You've known her for 12 years?"

"Yes. I've met her a year after inheriting this farm from my father. I'll never forget that day... You know, in all those years, I've never seen Julia seem confused or surprised, but on that day, she looked helplessly lost."

"Really?"

"She just showed up in this farm out of nowhere. Her clothes were slightly wet too, even though it hadn't rained for days. When she saw me, she asked me where she was, and after a while her face brightened up. I think she knew... Somehow, she knew that I was just like her."

"You mean, a woman born with a male body."

"Yes. But I didn't know it before meeting her. I didn't even know such a thing existed. Julia is the one who told me about it, and the moment she did, I knew that's what I was, too."

"But how did you know?"

"I just knew it to be true, in my heart. Vivian and Lily took a bit longer to figure it out though..."

"What about them? How did you meet?"

"Three years after we met, Julia and I decided that we should spread the word about the potion. So we started giving speeches from time to time. You know, like the one you heard. Julia brought

Vivian along that same year, and three years later, Lily heard one of my speeches."

"You owe Julia for meeting your wife, then."

"I owe Julia for a large number of reasons."

"And how did it happen? You and Vivian?"

"It wasn't love at first sight, to be honest. At first I thought she was a man, and I'm not interested in men... And while Vivian doesn't take that into account, the only thing she was interested in at that point was the potion."

Ulrich laughed. "Fair enough."

"But when she joined us two years later, we started growing closer, and at that point it was already clear she's a woman... We got married four years later."

"And Julia? She was okay with that?"

"We did ask her permission, but she just laughed and said we were a bit too old to ask permission to someone else."

"How old were you?"

"33. Vivian was 30."

"That's reasonable, then."

"I'm really glad we started making those speeches, otherwise I wouldn't have met my princess. Or Lily, who became a very good friend to us all."

"You know, up until now I thought that speech I've heard was your first one."

"Not at all."

"And in the other ones... Were people also doing..."

"They always do. People think that if you're born with a male body, you *must* be a man. That's wrong, but I guess no one likes being told they're wrong..."

"It must be hard to prepare for giving those speeches when you know people are gonna act like that..."

"It's never easy, but we have to. I can't put into words how much my life's improved after Julia taught me all she taught me. And there are others out there just like me... They also need to know. They *deserve* to know."

"You know," Ulrich said after some thought, "people always praise me for no good reason, but you're doing something that's actually praiseworthy, and you get treated that way..."

Laura shrugged. "Thank you, but I don't need praise. I really don't see how I could be doing anything any different in my life."

* * *

"So, how was it with the mares?" Vivian asked.

"Ulrich did a pretty good job," Laura replied.

"Thank you," Ulrich said. "And where are the others?"

"In the kitchen. Julia is helping Lily."

"Now she has to cook for one more person," Ulrich pondered.

"I hope I'm not being a burden."

"Actually, she seemed very happy to have you with us," Vivian answered. "But if you're concerned, why don't you help her tomorrow?"

Chapter 5

Lily

"I'm not much of a cook," Ulrich said, "but I'll do my best."

"Oh, I won't make you cook," Lily replied, "I just need you to slice and clean the ingredients, that kind of thing."

"That much I can do."

Lily tried to hide her smile.

"What is it?"

"I can't help it. A few days ago, I could never imagine that I'd meet you in person, and now you're here helping me cook. I'm sorry, I know you wanted to be treated like an ordinary person, but—"

"It's okay. I know it must be a strange situation for you."

"If I may ask..."

"Go on."

"Why did you choose to stay here now, with the next tournament coming up? I thought you'd be training. Or maybe you're so good you don't even need training?"

"...I'm not participating."

"Oh. Really?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"You didn't. But, why?"

"I guess I just needed some time to figure things out. And I thought Julia could help."

"She definitely can. She helped all of us figure a lot of things out."

"And how did that go for you?"

"It took me five years from the day I heard Laura's speech until I finally decided to join. *Five years...*"

"It's understandable. This must be pretty hard to wrap your head around."

"I had so many doubts in the beginning. How do I know? Laura keeps talking about having a female soul—how do I know if I have one? It's not like I can look at it and see if it's pink."

"Well, did you that find out?"

"I brought those doubts to Julia and she basically said it doesn't matter. The whole 'female soul' thing is just the explanation for why someone would want to live as woman, to begin with. The important thing, she told me, is finding out if this is what I want. But is this what I want?"

"Sounds like you just replaced one question with another."

"That did help, though. At least that's a question I could find an answer to. I still had a lot of doubts... except they weren't really doubts. It was all just fear. And when I finally ran out of excuses... When I had nothing else I could tell myself to argue maybe that's not what I want..."

"That's when you joined here."

"Not really."

"What?"

"I just started telling myself that I didn't *need* to do this. That even though I knew I would be happier living as a woman, I could still be happy as a man."

"But why settle for that? Why would you continue to live as a man, if you knew that's not what you wanted?"

"Because I knew everyone I cared about would never accept me otherwise."

"...That's harsh. I'm sorry to hear that."

Lily let out a deep sigh.

"Those people you're talking about..." Ulrich said.

"My family."

"Have they accepted it in the end?"

"I've only joined here last year. Maybe someday they will, but honestly, I'm not optimistic. Father keeps saying stuff like 'I don't have a son anymore'... Which is true, but he can't see he has a daughter, either."

"You've really been through a lot, Lily."

"I wasn't alone, though. Everyone here helped me so much... I don't know where I would be without them. Besides, things are a *lot* better now. My only regret is not doing this sooner, because if I did, I might already be feeling better about my body as well..."

"Hey, don't worry about that. You may have missed a few years, but you're still young, right?"

"I'm 26."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah, I look younger than I am."

"That's not it. We're the same age."

"Really?"

"I guess we do have a couple of things in common."

"...Do you also happen to have a complicated relationship with your parents?"

"My parents died during the Plague."

"Oh, I'm—wait, the Plague? But that was ten years ago. Are you telling me..."

"Yes."

"Wow. I don't even know what to say. You were so young..."

"It's okay. After that, a friend of my father took me in as an apprentice. A blacksmith. I was pretty bad at it, but that's when I started sneaking out swords to play with Bruno..."

"You mean, the other famous swordsman?"

"Yes. But I had no idea back then that we'd both become sword fighters, much less famous ones."

"So it's true that you're friends?"

"We're almost brothers."

"But he's also your rival, right? That must be weird."

"Not really. Having him as an opponent is what motivates me to do better. I think he feels the same, too."

"That's kind of cute. I like that."

"You like cute things, don't you? I don't think sword fighting can be called cute, though."

"Maybe not, but I like it too."

"I don't think you would want to be a sword fighter yourself, though."

"That's not for me. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy it. I also like men, even though I definitely didn't like being one myself..."

"Fair enough."

"But then again, Laura would probably say that deep down, I've always been a woman. I'm not sure if I can call myself a woman yet, though."

"Why not?"

"As I see it, I *really* want to be a woman... But when I look at them—Julia, Laura, Vivian—they're just amazing. I don't think I've earned the right to say I'm one of them."

"They clearly see you as one of them, though."

"I know..."

"Besides, you're pretty impressive yourself. Just listening to all you've told me today made that clear to me. It seems you just need a little more confidence."

"That honestly means a lot. Thank you, mister—no. Ulrich."

* * *

"Seems you're good at this too," Laura said to Ulrich, after tasting some of the food.

"Thanks, but Lily did the cooking. I've just helped around."

"By the way, Ulrich," Vivian said, "I intend to make more of the feminizing potion tomorrow. I don't need help, but you can come along if you want to know how it's done."

"Can I? I'd like to."

"But I should warn you beforehand, this probably isn't a good idea if your stomach gets easily upset."

"I think I can handle it."

"We'll see," Julia replied.

Chapter 6

Vivian

"I've already gathered the ingredients," Vivian said, "so we can go make the potion right away."

Vivian took Ulrich to an improvised room built next to the large stable. There was a cauldron in the middle of the room, along with several ceramic jars on the floor and a variety of glass objects on the shelves.

"I believe I've mentioned before that the feminizing potion is made out of a substance we extract from pregnant mares."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Well, there are basically two ways we could do this extraction. First, we could draw their blood, but that would weaken the mares at a time when they need all their energy to sustain themselves. That leaves us with the second alternative..."

"Which is?"

"Once again, if you think you might get nauseated, this is the time to say it."

"I told you, I'll be fine."

Vivian walked up to a closed ceramic jar and removed its lid.

"It smells like..."

"The second alternative. If not blood, urine."

"The potion is... HORSE PISS?!"

Vivian laughed. "No, Ulrich. We remove all impurities with the filters you see in those shelves."

"..."

"I assure you, it is a very thorough process."

"I believe you. I'm just shocked. To think *that* is what goes into

the potion..."

"That's understandable. Have you changed your mind about wanting to see how the potion is made?"

"Since I'm already here, I may as well see it through."

Vivian placed the full jar in a device where it remained slightly above the floor. Then, she opened an empty jar and took one of the filters from the shelves, setting it all up so the contents of the full jar would be filtered and slowly fall into the empty one.

"That's how it's done," Vivian said. "After going through this filter, it'll be as clean as it can be. This step takes a while, though."

"And then what?"

"Just dilute it with water, add something to give a nice flavor, and stir everything up."

"You even add flavor to this?"

"Of course. A few drops of lemon and orange."

"No pumpkin? What sort of witch's potion doesn't use pumpkin?" Ulrich joked.

Vivian didn't seem amused.

"By the way, Ulrich," Vivian said, after some awkward silence.

"Yes?"

"I understand you're a famous sword fighter, correct?"

"I am. Wait, you don't know me?"

"To be honest, I had no clue who you were when you first arrived here. Bouts as those don't suit my taste... I hope you don't mind."

"To each their own. I'm actually glad to meet someone who doesn't know me, for once."

"On the day we met, you said you would rather be treated as an ordinary person, despite your fame. Did you mean it?"

"I did. Why?"

"...Well, it suffices to say I understand your sentiment."

"You do?"

"I've never been famous myself, but I was once a member of a very prestigious institution... And I, too, have felt the weight of people's high hopes on my shoulders. So I couldn't help but empathize with your issue."

"Is that so..."

"I wanted to say it back then, but I didn't wish to sound pretentious, or draw attention to myself."

"And what institution would that be?"

"The Academy."

"The Academy?"

"The Royal Academy of Science."

"Wait, what? I thought only nobles could study there."

"That is correct."

"Are you telling me..."

"Again, I don't usually bring this up, but as a matter of fact, my father is an earl, and my mother, a countess."

Ulrich quickly knelt.

"Stop that," Vivian asked.

"But you're noble. I have to."

"No, you don't. Don't you want to be treated as an ordinary person? I would appreciate it if you treated me the same way."

"...I understand. I'm sorry, Vivian."

"Never mind..."

"That actually explains a lot, though," Ulrich said, after thinking for a while.

"What do you mean?"

"You have this... sophisticated air about you."

"I grew up with 'manners' being drilled into my head, so I suppose that's only natural. Truly unnecessary, if you ask me."

"That also explains why you seem so knowledgeable."

"Well, I did learn a lot while I was in the Academy."

"And why Laura calls you 'princess'."

Vivian blushed. "Yes, it's a playful allusion to my noble status..."

"It even explains why a humble farmer like Laura can read a speech from a scroll. You're the one who taught her to read, aren't you?"

"It's so satisfying, isn't it?"

"What?"

"To finally find that piece of information that makes everything fall into place. That's the feeling I live for."

"...Is that also what it felt like when you figured it out? You know, that you're a woman and so on?"

"That was more like an earthquake..."

"Really?"

"When I heard that speech from Julia, she mentioned the feminizing potion, and I was fascinated. I wanted to know *every-*

thing about it. And I told myself that my interest was purely academic..."

"But it wasn't."

"Of course not. My heart raced at the thought of someone being able to change their own body like that... Every day I had a stronger desire to take that potion myself, and start living as a woman. But I told myself I couldn't."

"Why?"

"I was afraid of letting go of my old life, even though it was hollow and meaningless, because I knew there was no turning back. I knew if I did that, I'd have to quit the Academy and cut ties with my family, because there's absolutely no way they would understand or accept that."

"I see."

"And so I tried to resume my old life, pretending I had never seen all I had seen. But of course, that was impossible. I couldn't stop thinking about how my life could be... You know, I even resented the day I've met Julia and all that she taught me."

"Really?"

"But then I realized how wrong it was to think that way. Knowledge should be welcomed, not resented. Julia showed me I had a choice, and at some point I had to make that choice."

"And so you came back."

"Yes, after not showing up here for quite a while. And I basically begged Julia and Laura to let me be one of them, which, to my great surprise, they did."

"It's not that surprising that they would accept one of their own. You also have a female soul, right?"

"That's how Laura sees it—and naturally, I respect her beliefs. I don't necessarily share them, though. I'm not even sure if souls truly exist, to begin with."

"Really? Then how do you explain it?"

"I don't know if I've always been a woman, or if I simply became one. I also don't know why it made such a big difference in my life. What I do know is I'm a woman now, and I'm much happier this way."

"Isn't there anything you miss about your old life, though? I mean, living as a noble and all..."

"The one thing I miss is being taken seriously by most."

Chapter 7

The initiation

"Hey, Julia."

"Hello, Ulrich. Fine weather today, isn't it? The plants seem delighted."

"Yeah..."

"But you're not here to talk about that. I assume you're getting to know them better. Laura, Vivian and Lily."

"I am."

"And what did you find?"

"Why are you asking me that? You know them better than me."

"I'm asking you what did *you* find, because getting to know other people is a way of learning about yourself. Isn't that why you're here?"

"It is. Well... I'm surprised to see how different they are from each other."

"You're surprised to find that different people are, in fact, different?"

"When you put it that way..."

"Never mind that. What else did you find?"

"It's clear they've been through a lot, and had to make sacrifices to be here, but they're all much better off now..."

"How did you feel while listening to all that?"

"Well, I felt happy for them."

"Naturally. What else?"

"..."

"Ulrich, if you want me to help, you need to start by being honest. If not with me, at least with yourself."

"...Envy. I've felt envy."

"Why?"

"Because they've figured it out already. I mean, they've found out what they needed to do to be happy. And I didn't."

"That's understandable."

"No it's not. I shouldn't be feeling this way."

"Get off your high horse, Ulrich. You're gonna need to face a lot of things about yourself, and most of them, you won't be proud of."

"..."

"Stay there. I'll get you something."

Julia went inside the house and returned with two wooden swords.

"Again?" Ulrich asked.

"We're going to practice."

"But why? I'm not entering the tournament."

"You still need to keep your skill as sharp as your blade to defend yourself, if you need to. I'd like us to train regularly, you and I—frankly, I don't want to get rusty, either."

"Alright then. En garde!"

The training went on for a long time.

"If it wasn't for my age, I'd keep going," Julia said.

"You must have been a great sword fighter when you were young."

"About as good as you are now."

"This reminds me of training with Bruno..."

"What's wrong?"

"I feel guilty. About skipping the tournament."

"You chose to, didn't you?"

"I imagine a lot of people will be disappointed to find I'm not there."

"It's not your fault."

"Are you saying it's okay to let everyone down like this?"

"I'm saying it's not your fault. You never asked them to create those expectations, and like you've said yourself, what they expect from you is very different from what you are."

"But that doesn't mean I want to disappoint them."

"You sound a lot like Lily when she was trying to live as a man. She also tried to be something she wasn't, so she wouldn't disappoint her family."

"...Wow. It's true. I couldn't understand why she would do that, but here I am doing pretty much the same thing..."

"You understand now what I said? Knowing other people, we learn more about ourselves."

"I see that now."

"No matter how hard you try, you can't run away from who you are. So stop blaming yourself for not being what they want you to be."

* * *

"Good morning, everyone," Ulrich called.

"Good morning!" Lily replied.

"You look excited today."

"I'm finally getting initiated tomorrow."

"Oh, there's an initiation? I didn't know that. So you're gonna formally enter the group now?"

"Actually, the initiation is not mandatory to join the group," Vivian said.

"Yeah, the only requirement for joining is that all members must agree," Laura added. "But then again, we've all chosen to be initiated at some point."

"Is it some sort of ritual?" Ulrich asked. "It sounds interesting. Can I watch?"

Lily turned pale, and there was a striking silence.

"...I shouldn't have said that, right?"

"Don't look so mortified, everyone," Julia said, "Ulrich doesn't know anything about the initiation. You see, only two people are allowed in it: the one undergoing it—in this case, Lily—and the one conducting it—that's always myself, since no one else has the guts to do it."

"Yeah, I pass," Laura replied.

"You can't possibly ask me to do something of that sort of thing," Vivian said.

"What is this initiation, though? If I may ask..."

"I think explaining it now would be awfully embarrassing for Lily," Laura pondered.

"You're always so thoughtful, Laura," Lily replied. "But it's okay. I just wouldn't know how to put it..."

"I'll take it from here," Vivian said. "You see, the initiation increases the efficacy of the feminizing process. Also, without doing it, one would have to continue taking the potion indefinitely, otherwise the process might be partially reverted."

"Is that so?"

"The feminizing potion provides the body with the female substance, but in addition to that, it's also necessary to prevent the male substance from acting. I've been looking for potions to do that as well, but so far, the most effective way we know of is..."

"What?"

"...removing the body part that produces it."

Ulrich flinched.

"I thought the potion took care of that," Ulrich said. "I mean, I thought it changed things... down there."

"The potion only brings about the changes that happen in female puberty," Vivian replied, "and that's not one of them."

"...But how do you pee?"

"Not *that* part," Laura replied. "The other one."

There was silence.

"I've seen that look on your face before," Laura said. "You're thinking we must be insane for voluntarily doing something like this."

"I'm not. Vivian explained why, and it makes sense. But it's such a... drastic measure."

"That is why I'm constantly looking for alternatives," Vivian said. "I do believe they exist. But so far, this is what we have."

"First there's the potion's ingredients, and now this... you all really go to great lengths to do this..."

"What other choice do we have?" Laura replied. "We're just doing what we can do to be comfortable with our bodies."

"So you're looking forward to this?" Ulrich asked Lily.

"Absolutely," she replied. "And not only because of 'increasing the efficacy' and so on. I really think that this... *thing* doesn't belong here. I don't even think of it as a part of my body."

"...I see," Ulrich said, after some thought. "I'm definitely surprised with all that, but I understand you're happy about it, so I'm happy for you as well, Lily."

"You're really kind, Ulrich," Lily replied. "Thank you..."

* * *

"Hey, Lily."

"Ulrich?"

"Are you alright?"

"I've never been better..."

"I've heard the initiation was a success."

"Yeah."

"I've also heard you should be better in a week or two. I really hope so..."

"That's so sweet..."

"...because I miss your cooking."

"Ulrich!"

Ulrich laughed. "Hey, don't shout like that. You need to rest."

"...I'm surprised you've come see me."

"They're taking turns to take care of you, right? It's only fair that I help with that too."

"You didn't have to."

"I wanted to."

"Ulrich..."

"Shh. Just rest. I'll be right here with you."

Lily closed her eyes and smiled.

Chapter 8

A bold plan

"Good morning, everyone," Ulrich called.

"Good morning..." Lily replied.

"..."

"..."

"What happened?" Vivian asked. "Why is everyone so quiet?"

"It's today," Julia explained. "The tournament."

"The one I'm not entering," Ulrich added.

"Normally, I wouldn't miss it for anything," Lily said, "but since you won't be in it..."

"Do you also think it will be a bore?"

"Well... I just don't want to leave you behind. Especially because you've looked after me as well..."

"I appreciate that, Lily, but you can go if you want."

"Really?"

"Don't worry, I'm fine."

"I'm going as well, then," Laura said. "But I'm not inviting you, princess; I already know what the answer's gonna be."

"You know me well, darling," Vivian replied. "I'll stay here and take care of things. And you, Julia?"

"Dueling is fun, watching is boring," Julia replied.

"...Ulrich," Lily called.

"Yes?"

"Would you, by any chance, like to come along?"

"You mean, to watch the tournament instead? That didn't even cross my mind..."

"Lily, you know he can't accept it," Laura said. "What do you think is gonna happen if he's seen with us?"

"Laura, I've told you before, I don't care about being seen with you."

"I think you should, though. Unlike us, you have a reputation."

"The problem isn't to be seen with you. It's to be seen at all. People would obviously ask why I'm not in the tournament, and I wouldn't know what to answer..."

* * *

Ulrich headed to the field where he and Bruno usually trained, at the usual time, wearing his usual hood.

"Hey, Bruno!"

"Ulrich!"

"I thought I might find you here. Congratulations on winning the tournament, man!"

"Thanks, brother. It was a piece of cake, like I thought. But my victory wouldn't be complete without defeating one more swordsman..."

"Really?"

"Come on, Ulrich. If you win, the title is yours."

Ulrich unsheathed his sword in response.

Both of them fought valiantly, but in the end, Bruno won.

"No way!" Ulrich exclaimed. "If I had trained more, I wouldn't have lost..."

"The whining of a sore loser..."

"Alright, alright. I concede defeat."

"So, Ulrich. How have you been?"

"I honestly think taking a step back from all this was the right thing to do."

"You can't imagine what sorts of weird rumors are going on about you. Some people are saying you're dead, others, that you've been kidnapped..."

Ulrich laughed. "Let them speak. Anything about witches?"

"No, I think you're safe for now. You can't hide forever, though."

"Yeah, I know. I'll just lie low for a while."

"And how's it going with them? It's been almost a month now."

"Julia's been helping me out a lot. She really is wise."

"Glad to hear that."

"But I've been thinking... it's really unfair, you know. They way they get treated. If you had seen what people were doing to one of them while she trying to give a speech..."

"Is that so?"

"I wish I could do something about it."

"What a gentleman you are. You can't see a woman in trouble and you're already thinking about helping?"

"..."

"Ulrich?"

"Why does everything have to be like that?"

"Huh?"

"If I'm a man and they're women—what's the difference? You see someone in trouble, it makes you wanna help. Isn't that natural?"

"Regardless, you should be careful, Ulrich. Don't get too involved with them."

* * *

"Hey, Laura."

"Hi Ulrich. You're gonna help me with the mares today?"

"Yes. But also, I wanted to talk to you."

"Go on."

"I've been thinking about what you said the other day. That I shouldn't be seen with you because I have a reputation. But what if it works the other way around?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are all treated horribly, but I think I can do something about it. The next time one of you gives a speech, I can be there. I can lend you my credibility."

"...Are you serious about this?"

"Yes."

"And what would you do, exactly?"

"I'd just say a few words explaining why I didn't show up in the tournament, introduce the person who's going to talk, and you'd do the rest."

"And you're just gonna stand there with that sword while we speak."

"I don't have to use my sword. My fame should be enough to make people listen to what you have to say, at least."

"Ulrich. You understand that if you do that, your image will be tied to ours? For better or worse. There's no turning back after that."

"I understand."

"Are you really sure you wanna do this?"

"I never asked to be called the great, mighty swordsman they think I am. At least now I have the chance do something good out of it."

"...It's a bold plan, Ulrich. But it *might* work. I need to speak with the others..."

* * *

"Attention, please!" a hooded figure shouted, and took off the hood.

"Is that..."

"Ulrich!"

"Ulrich? The swordsman?"

"I thought he was missing?!"

"Yes, it's me," Ulrich said. "I've finally decided to come forth and explain why I haven't participated in the tournament this year..."

"It really is him!"

"Who's that woman beside him?"

"Fate has led me to a group of four women," Ulrich continued, "who are all remarkable, in their own ways; but the most remarkable thing about them is the unfair treatment they get, being called 'witches' and so on..."

"Witches?"

"He actually said 'witches'?"

"Ulrich is going around with witches?!"

"They're not witches," Ulrich replied, "despite what people say. They're ordinary women. And yet, their story is extraordinary indeed. I'm here today to make sure that story will be heard. Beside me is Vivian; listen carefully to what she has to say."

"Thank you, Ulrich. Indeed, Vivian is my name. But that is not the name that was given to me as a child, for I was born with a male body..."

"What?"

"How can that be?"

"But she looks like a woman..."

"We need proof of that!"

"Is this enough proof?" Vivian said with a deep voice that surprised even Ulrich.

"Whoa!"

"She sounded just like a man!"

"That's right," Vivian continued, with her ordinary voice. "I can still use the voice I used to have. But as you can see and hear, I am, in fact, a woman."

"That can't be!"

"But how?!"

"By means of a potion, which is why we have been labeled 'witches'. But make no mistake: there is no magic or incantation in any of this. It can all be explained with logic and reason. Allow me, thus, to explain how—and perhaps more importantly, why—we have done it."

The stunned crowd listened to the speech without interrupting once. They dispersed afterwards, commenting in disbelief.

"This is usually nerve-racking," Vivian said to Ulrich after all the people were gone, "but this speech went really smoothly."

"Yeah, I was worried they would be so surprised about me that they wouldn't pay any attention to what you had to say. Didn't seem like it, though."

"I must thank you for doing this, Ulrich."

"..."

"What's wrong?"

"Laura called this a bold plan... Do you think it's gonna work?"

"It's a bit too late to worry about that, isn't it?"

"I know, but..."

"Besides, Julia thought it was a great idea, and I've never seen her intuition fail."

"She may be wise, but it's not like she knows the future, right?"

"Well, that's true. We'll have to wait and see for ourselves."

Chapter 9

Birthday gift

"I still can't believe it," Laura said. "They actually fixed our names on the records..."

"On our marriage record too," Vivian added. "I even heard there are other groups like our own forming now, with what we've taught about the feminizing potion..."

"I really wasn't sure about that plan, but it definitely paid off. Julia was right, as usual."

"If you want to praise someone," Julia said, "it should be Ulrich here."

"It's true. Thanks a lot, Ulrich. You've been with us in... how many speeches, now?"

"I've lost count," Ulrich replied. "Honestly, I'm just glad I've been able to help you all."

Lily seemed pensive.

"What's the matter, Lily?" Laura asked.

"You all have given so many speeches," Lily replied, "but I haven't given a single one yet..."

"Last time we talked about it, you thought you weren't ready for that yet."

"But that was before. Now we have Ulrich with us, it should be a lot easier, right?"

"It's true, but speaking in public still takes some courage, you know."

"That's exactly why I want to do it. I need to prove to myself I can do as much as any of you. Ulrich..."

"Yes?"

"You've said before that I just needed confidence. If you're around, I believe I can do this. Are you willing to go with me?"

* * *

"Attention, everyone! My name is Ulrich, and today, I'd like to introduce you to Lily. She's the youngest woman from the Galree farm, and the one I'm closest to. Please, listen carefully."

"Um, good morning, everyone... M-my name is Lily..."

She looked at the crowd, and they were looking back, waiting for her to say something.

"I'm here today... Um. Sorry. I'm here to tell you about... I mean. I'm here to tell you that..."

Lily closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"That I'm done with this!"

Ulrich was taken aback, and so was the crowd.

"I'm done with being a coward! I'm done with not having the courage I need! I've wasted too much time in this life running away. No, not anymore!"

Lily stopped to recollect her breath. People stared at each other without understanding, but started to cheer anyway.

"I... should probably explain what I'm talking about," Lily said after the crowd settled down, and began to tell her life story.

"Don't let anyone," she said towards the end, "and I mean *anyone*, tell you you're selfish for wanting to be happy. Even if you have to break rules—as long as you're not actually harming someone, they don't have the right to tell you your way of living is wrong. That's what I wanted to tell you today. Thank you for listening."

The people applauded, and dispersed after a while.

"You did it!" Ulrich said to Lily.

"I can't believe it. My heart's still pounding..."

"That was a hell of a speech too. I was really shocked at the beginning though..."

Lily laughed. "Even I was..."

"I'm proud of you, Lily."

"Thank you, Ulrich. It's all thanks to you..."

"Nah, you're the one who did it."

"I would never have done this without your support. You even helped me recover from the initiation back then... You really are a wonderful man, Ulrich."

"..."

"Ulrich?"

"...Say, Lily. How did you feel before about being called 'sir', 'mister' and so on?"

"You mean, before meeting Laura? Well, everyone called me a man, so that's I thought what I was, too. I was never really attached to the idea of me as a man, though. The reason is pretty obvious in hindsight..."

"And after that? You did try to live as a man for a while, right?"

"Oh, then it was like a punch in the gut. Even when I still had doubts, it just felt wrong to be called that way. Like, 'ugh, I know that's how you see me, don't remind me,' something like that."

"..."

"Why are you asking me that? You're acting a bit weird."

"It's nothing. All that matters now is that you did it. Come on, we've gotta let them know."

* * *

Julia finished talking, and people applauded and left.

"A fine speech that was," said a hooded figure, approaching Ulrich and Julia. "Honestly, I'm impressed."

Ulrich shivered.

"Thank you, Bruno," Julia replied.

Bruno took off his hood. "How did you know it was me?"

"It's pretty obvious. Famous sword fighters tend to wear hoods in public so people won't bother them. And Ulrich is right here, so it could only be you."

"You're quite clever as well, huh..."

"...Bruno, this is Julia," Ulrich said.

"So you're Julia? The leader of the witches?"

"They insist on calling me their leader, and people insist on calling us witches. But it's also obvious I'm not the one you want to talk to, so if you'll excuse me."

Julia took her leave.

"...What a weird woman," Bruno remarked.

"Yeah, she really is a little odd..."

"Ulrich, what the hell were you thinking?"

"Bruno..."

"I told you not to get involved, and this is what you do? Maybe I should have told you to do this instead, then you wouldn't have..."

"You think I'm some sort of rebellious kid who does the opposite of what they're told? I did it because it was the right thing to do."

"Oh, Ulrich. So noble, so righteous. Did you even stop to think of all the ways this could go horribly wrong?"

"Of course I did."

"And you did it anyway."

"I had to try."

Bruno put his hand over his forehead. "Man, you're as stubborn as ever..."

"You're one to talk..."

"I've made plenty of mistakes, Ulrich, but never one as monumental as this."

"And who said this was a mistake? The plan's going perfectly well, if you ask me."

"For now. And when it inevitably goes wrong, don't say I didn't try to warn you."

Bruno walked away.

* * *

"There you are. What are you doing here?"

"Hey Julia. Just thinking..."

Julia sat down by Ulrich's side.

"Do you have a habit of drinking outside and staring at the moon while everyone else is having fun inside?"

Ulrich laughed. "You'd be surprised."

"Come on, Ulrich. We're celebrating you today."

"And you, as well. I was surprised to learn we have the same birthday. I mean, what are the odds?"

"Higher than you might think, or so Vivian told me. Anyway, the reason I say we're celebrating you isn't just the date. We're all grateful for what you've done."

"Thank you, Julia. I'll go back in a moment..."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Do you also have a habit of turning people away when they're worried about you? You did the same with Lily, on the tournament day."

"...It's true. And with Bruno before that, too."

"Let me ask you the same question I asked when I met you: why are you here?"

"What?"

"When you came back here, you said you wanted my help to figure things out. Do you still want my help?"

"Of course."

"Then tell me. Why are you helping us?"

"You're not telling me you think I have ulterior motives, are you?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'm sure you don't understand your own motives. But I'm also sure helping us with our problems won't allow you to run away from your own."

"..."

"It wasn't a rhetorical question. I actually want you to think about it, since you're out here thinking anyway. Why are you helping us?"

"It was the right thing to do..."

"And why us, of all people? If all you wanted was to put your fame to good use, surely you could have found plenty of others to help instead."

"Well... maybe. But I happened to meet Laura that day, so..."

"So it was all just chance?"

"I did feel some sort of... connection to your issues, as well."

"The fact you did tells you something about yourself. Something you don't seem willing to face."

"Can't I just be someone who's trying to help?"

"Someone else might be. You don't get to choose who you are. Your only choice is whether or not you allow yourself to see it."

Julia stood up and left.

"There you are, birthday boy!" Lily called. "Come on, come back in!"

Lily took Ulrich's hand and led him back.

* * *

"Lily?"

"Shh! Hello, Ulrich," she said quietly.

"What are you doing in my room?" he asked in the same tone.

"Ulrich, listen to me. You've given me confidence. And you've taught me that sometimes, you have to take risks. I wanted to give you a late birthday gift as a way of saying thank you—but above all, because this is what I wanted to do. And yes, it's been almost a week since your birthday, but..."

"Thank you, Lily. But that could have waited until tomorrow..."

Lily giggled. "Oh, you silly... Ulrich. You have taken very good care of me."

Lily undid the knot in her robe's string, letting it fall to the floor.

"Let me take care of you this time."

"...Lily?"

"Shh. Relax, Ulrich. Let me handle things from here."

"Did you drink something?"

"I wanted to be sober for this. So if that's what you're worried about..."

Lily came closer, but Ulrich looked away.

"What's wrong? Don't like what you see?"

"You're beautiful, Lily," Ulrich replied after looking her up and down. "That's not what this is about..."

"Then what is it?"

Ulrich let out a sigh.

"I can't do this. I'm sorry, Lily..."

"Why not?"

"I... don't know. I really don't know..."

Lily distanced herself and looked at him in dismay.

"I guess you don't see me as a woman when it really counts."

"That's not the problem, Lily."

"Then what *is* the problem, Ulrich?"

Ulrich covered his face with both hands. Lily let out an exasperated sigh, put her robe back on, and left.

Chapter 10

Revelation

Very early on that day, Ulrich gathered his belongings and silently went to the stable where his horse was.

"Hello, Ulrich."

"Julia?! What are you doing here?!"

"I'm getting old, and the older I get, the less I sleep. So I decided to go for a stroll. As for you, I can only assume you were about to leave without saying a word."

"..."

"Would you mind explaining yourself?"

Ulrich took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Julia. I've let one of you down. She must be feeling deeply hurt, and it's my fault... I must leave."

"It's so tempting to run away from your problems, isn't it? Unfortunately, it doesn't work. Your problems will just follow you."

"Of course. Because I'm the problem."

"That's not what I meant."

"That's what *I* meant. I've failed as a man. I've failed as a sword fighter. I've failed everything. That's what I am—a failure."

Ulrich sat down on the ground and let out a deep sigh.

Julia sat next to him.

"You're not a failure, Ulrich. You only think like that because what you expect from yourself is wrong."

"You're just trying to make me feel better..."

"I'm not. You already know what people want from you—including the one you've just let down. But what do *you* want, Ulrich?"

"..."

"I think you're finally ready now."

"For what?"

"For the moment you've been running from all along. It's finally time for you to face who you really are."

"But how?"

"Actually, it wouldn't be a bad idea to leave for a while and go somewhere you can be alone with your thoughts. I know the perfect place, too. But not like this. I want you to say goodbye properly—especially to the one you've let down."

"I don't even know how I could face her now..."

"That's what you actually must do, instead of leaving. If you hurt someone, you apologize."

"But what am I gonna say to her?"

"Thankfully, you're up early, so you'll have plenty of time to think about it."

"...Julia."

"Yes?"

"How do you know I haven't done something terrible? I was about to leave like this... Seriously, ever since the day we met, you've always seemed to just trust me somehow."

"Honestly? You remind me of myself, when I was younger."

"Really? I'm flattered."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"..."

Julia stood up, and offered Ulrich a hand.

"Thank you, Julia. For talking some sense into me."

* * *

"Excuse me, Lily," Ulrich said, and went into her room.

Lily gave him one glance and turned her back to him, crossing her arms.

"...About last night. I wanted to tell you..."

No response.

"I'm sorry."

Again, no response.

"...I'm leaving."

Lily quickly turned her head to look at him. "What do you mean, leaving?"

"I wanted to say goodbye..."

"So I'll never see you again?"

"It's just for a while. Maybe a week or two... But I'll be back."

"You will?"

"Yes. I promise."

"You'd better keep that promise. Don't break my heart again."

"Lily..."

She turned her back to him again. "Get out."

* * *

"So, this is the place?" Ulrich asked.

"Yes," Julia replied. "It's where I always come when I need some solitary reflection..."

"That's a pretty impressive waterfall. I can hear it from here!"

Julia closed her eyes with a sad smile.

"...Julia? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I can't help but get a bit... sentimental when I come here."

"Really?"

"This place is very important to me. It brings a lot of memories back..."

"Julia. I've heard everyone's stories at this point. What about yours?"

Julia shook her head. "This isn't about me. I've brought you here because you're the one in need of some solitary reflection now."

* * *

"Hey everyone! Ulrich's back!" Laura announced.

"Welcome back," Julia said.

"How have you been?" Vivian asked.

Lily stared, and didn't say anything.

"Hello everyone. I'm glad you're all here, because I wanted to talk to all of you..."

"Go on," Julia said.

"It's been almost two weeks, and that was plenty of time for me to acknowledge something about myself... Something I've suspected for a while, but didn't want to admit. But if there's one thing I learned here, it's that there's no point in running away from who you are. It's about time I told you about it..."

"What do you mean, Ulrich?" Laura asked.

"...Please, don't call me by that name."

"What?"

"Listen. I've always admired you all. And I told myself it's because you have managed to break free from people's expectations to be yourselves—and that's true, but that's only part of the truth. I told myself I needed to help you because the way you were treated was so unfair—but too was only part of the truth. The other part... is that I'm just like you. Deep down, I'm a woman, too. And I hope you're willing to accept me in your group..."

Laura and Vivian stared at each other wide-eyed.

Julia laughed. "You should see your faces..."

"Julia. You're not surprised to hear this?" Vivian asked.

"Not at all."

"Wait, so you knew it all along? Why didn't you just tell me?!"

"Because I have no say in that. I told you before, there's plenty of people telling you who you are, already. You had to figure it out by yourself."

"..."

"Tell me. What should we call you?"

"To be honest, I really like your name..."

"Then take it."

"I think it would be pretty awkward with two Julias around. I've been thinking of Sara..."

"Well then, Sara. Keep in mind you can change your name later, if you wish."

"Thank you."

Julia stood up from the table they were all sitting at, and placed herself by Sara's side.

"I must formally ask each of you. Do you accept Sara as one of us? Laura."

"I'm really shocked, but yeah, absolutely."

"Vivian."

"I, too, welcome Sara into our group."

"Lily."

"..."

"Lily? Do you accept Sara?"

She sank down into her thoughts, while Sara looked visibly nervous.

But after a while, Lily looked up with a smile.

"Of course!"

"Congratulations, Sara," Julia announced. "You're one of us."

* * *

"Excuse me, Julia," Sara said, knocking at the door.

"Come in, young lady."

Sara tried to hold back her smile. "What is this, Julia? Why am I smiling like a fool just because you called me 'lady'?"

"As of recently, did it bother you to be referred to as 'man' and such?"

"Well, to tell the truth, yes."

"This is the opposite. It's what it feels like to finally be acknowledged for who you are. Don't worry, you'll get used to it. It won't make you smile uncontrollably anymore, but it'll still feel right."

"I see..."

"Did you want to talk?"

"I just wanted to say thank you. If it wasn't for your help, I may never have figured this out..."

"I'm glad I could help you, but in the end, you're the one who did it. Besides, I'm happy to have you with us."

"...You are?"

"This may come as a surprise to you, Sara, but I have feelings too."

"Of course. I didn't mean—"

"It's alright."

"Anyway, I really owe you one. Thanks to you, I feel like my journey has finally come to an end."

Julia burst out laughing.

"...What's so funny?"

"Ah, to be young and naive... Your journey isn't over, Sara. It's just beginning."

Chapter 11

Just beginning

Julia gave a wooden sword to Sara.

"We're still doing this?"

"Of course. It's important to practice, for the same reasons as before."

"Say, Julia... sword fighting isn't very feminine, right? Is it still okay for me to do it?"

"Do you like it?"

"Well, yes."

"Then, yes."

"But..."

"When people understand you're a woman, they'll expect different things from you, but just like before, you have no obligation to do what they expect."

"...Will they will understand I'm a woman, though?"

"Unfortunately, not anytime soon. Perhaps one day people will finally learn there's more than meets the eye..."

"Speaking of which... the potion. When can I start taking it?"

"Would you like to?"

"Absolutely."

"First, you need to learn how to make it yourself."

"Is that so? I thought Vivian made Lily's potion."

"Yes, but only after she proved she can make it too. If you want to take it, you need to make it. It's the same rule for everyone."

"Alright then. This should be fun."

* * *

"This is *not* fun."

"Come on, Sara," Vivian said. "Let's try again."

"It looked so easy when you did it. I didn't realize there were so many ways to screw it up."

"Everything looks easy when someone else is doing it," Julia remarked.

"Julia, is this really necessary? I mean, we all know Vivian will end up making my potions anyway..."

Julia approached Sara, and stared deep into her eyes with a furious gaze.

"Listen to me. One day *you'll* be the one teaching about this potion! So you're gonna learn *everything* about it, and you're gonna keep doing it until you know it all by heart! Do you understand?!"

Sara was taken aback with her reaction.

Julia returned to where she was. "Again."

* * *

"Lily..."

"Hey, Sara."

"Would you like help in the kitchen today?"

"Of course! Slice these for me, please."

There was silence for a while.

"I heard you're learning how to make the potion now," Lily said.

"Yeah..."

"Don't worry, everyone struggled in the beginning. Well, except Vivian, I guess."

"I'm surprised with how strict Julia is."

"Yeah, she doesn't mess around. She thinks it's very important to know *every* detail about that potion so we can teach about it later."

"Honestly, I understand why she's doing that. It's not like she's just being... bossy or something. But that just makes things worse. I can't even get mad at her."

"Sara, look at me. You can do this. We all did."

"...Thank you, Lily."

Silence again.

"Lily."

"Yes?"

"Why are you being so nice to me? Why did you allow me into the group, in the first place? I thought you were really mad at me..."

"I was. But that was before."

"You have the right to be mad. What I did to you—"

"You did nothing wrong. It was my fault."

"What do you mean?"

"It never even crossed my mind you might be like me—not in this way, at least. Honestly, I should have known better than just assume you were a man..."

"There's no way you could have known."

"And I shouldn't have just... done that without knowing how you felt about me."

"Hey, you took your chances. I don't blame you."

"But now that I know who you are, I'm actually glad nothing happened that night."

"You are?"

"I'm not interested in women."

Sara smiled.

"Thank you, Lily. I'm sorry I couldn't be the man you wanted..."

"Sara. Don't apologize for being who you are."

* * *

Julia took a sip of the potion. "There's only one thing missing."

"What is it this time..." Sara replied with a tired voice.

"Flavor."

"...Wait. Does that mean—"

"It's perfect. You did it, Sara."

"No way! I did it?!"

"Keep at it. Soon, you won't need anyone's supervision."

"Can I take this one, then?"

"Of course. It's your potion."

"The first of many!"

Sara drank it all in one gulp.

"You didn't even add flavor..." Vivian said.

* * *

"Sara. You look sad. What's the matter?"

"Hey Julia. It's nothing..."

"You can talk to me, if you want."

"It's just... You know, now that I finally understand who I am, I'm also starting to see a lot of things I didn't... I didn't care too much about how I looked like before, but now, every time I catch a glimpse of my reflection..."

"I know how you feel."

"You do?"

"I've been through that too."

"But why? I was fine with it before..."

"Sometimes, when we're 'fine' with something, it's just a way of coping with it. You hide the problem away and convince yourself there's no problem. Except it's still there. The only way to solve it is to face it directly—but in doing so, you become painfully aware of it..."

"So you're telling me I have to suffer even more before it starts to get better."

"...It's cruel, I know."

"At least I'm taking the potion now, but it's also gonna take a lot of time to work..."

"Sara—"

"I know what you're gonna say. It's only been a month, and I need to have patience, and you all have already told me this would take a long time..."

"I wasn't gonna say any of that."

"You weren't?"

"You already know that. What I actually wanted to say is that I've been through all of that before, and I understand your pain. But trust me, it does get better."

"...I really appreciate that, Julia. But I don't understand you. Sometimes you're harsh, sometimes you're gentle..."

"I'm saying what I think you need to hear. And that's not always what you want to hear. But now, I think what you need is this..."

Julia gave Sara a hug.

"...Julia?"

"Come on. Cry. Let it all out."

Sara reciprocated the hug, and started crying. The two stayed that way for a while.

"Feeling better?" Julia asked, after Sara had calmed down.

"I am. Thank you, Julia."

"It feels good to let it out sometimes, right?"

"I don't even remember the last time I cried like this..."

"It could be the potion. It has that effect on some people, at least in the beginning."

"Really?"

"Or it could be that you've been burying your feelings deep inside for so long, and only now are you allowing yourself to be in touch with your feelings again."

"...Which one is it?"

"What do you think?"

* * *

"Hey, Sara."

"Lily?"

"Are you alright?"

"I've never been better..."

"I've heard the initiation was a success."

"...Have we had this conversation before?"

Lily laughed. "We did. But I was in your place."

"Lily..."

"Shh. Just rest, Sara. It's time for me to repay the favor."

* * *

"So, everyone," Sara said, while they were having lunch. "I've been thinking... I've been with you for a little over four months now."

"Time flies, doesn't it?" Laura said.

"It hasn't been easy at all, but I'm really glad I've joined. And now, I think the time has finally come..."

"The time for what?"

"For me to make a speech."

"Honestly, I think you've already helped significantly in spreading the word about the potion," Vivian said.

"Besides, we've decided to stop doing speeches for a while, right?" Laura added. "I thought it was because you weren't ready to go with us and tell everyone that you're in our group... And even if you weren't there with us, people would ask about you anyway."

“I wasn’t ready. But I am now. People are probably going around, talking about an ‘Ulrich’ that doesn’t even exist... It’s about time they know. I need to tell everyone... who I really am.”

Chapter 12

The duel

Sara took a deep breath, and removed her hood.

"Hey, isn't that Ulrich?"

"Ulrich! I thought he had disappeared again?"

"...I did disappear," Sara said, "but this time for a different reason. I believe you've all heard how I've been with the women of the Galree farm during their speeches... After a long time, I've finally come to understand that I'm actually just like them, and now I'm officially a member of their group."

"What?!"

"Ulrich's one of the witches now?"

"...And that's not my name anymore. My name is Sara."

"Is this a joke?"

"What is he thinking?"

"Those witches have gotten to his head..."

"Hey! Don't you understand? I'm one of them. I'm a woman too."

"Of course you are..."

"Ulrich's gone mad."

"You think they've brainwashed him?"

"That's what you get for getting along with witches."

"Are you deaf?! How can I make you understand? I'm a woman! And that's not my name!"

But it was pointless. The more Sara tried to argue, the angrier they got. Eventually, Sara let out a sigh and left while the people booed.

* * *

"That was a mistake," Sara said.

"You mean trying to do that speech?" Julia asked.

"I mean joining this group."

"You said the other day you were glad you've done it."

"Before I joined, I managed to get your voices to be heard. But now... Now, I've ruined your reputation again. Everything we worked for... gone. If I didn't join..."

"So you think you can run away from who you are?"

"...What?"

"Tell me. Do you think being a woman is like that hood you wear, that you can put on when you want, and put off when it's convenient? Even if you didn't join us, that wouldn't change who you are, and it wouldn't change what just happened."

"..."

"Were our names changed back in the records?"

"No..."

"And the other groups that were formed with what we've taught, have they been dissolved?"

"I don't think so, but..."

"Our reputation isn't ruined. Yours is."

"I don't care about my reputation..."

"You could afford to say that when you still had it. What about now?"

"..."

"You've just felt in your own skin what what we've seen so many times before. They don't understand us. They hate us."

"I thought I had helped with that..."

"You did. But you didn't solve it. Hatred can't be slain with a sword."

"I wish it could be."

"That's just a piece of metal, Sara."

"How can you say that?! You're a sword fighter too!"

"That's exactly why I can say that."

"..."

"There will be setbacks along the way, but that doesn't mean all progress was lost. Don't despair."

* * *

"Sara. Are you sure you want to do this?" Lily asked.

"Yeah, you don't really have to," Laura added.

"Oh, but I do. I didn't become a sword fighter by giving up after losing. Although..."

"Although?"

"I think this time it would be better to plan ahead what I'm going to say."

"I've already taught you to read," Vivian remarked. "I can help you write a speech, if you want."

* * *

"Good subjects of our kingdom!" Sara said, reading from her scroll.

"What is that?"

"Ulrich's at it again..."

"You have all known under a different name," she continued, "but my true name is Sara..."

"He can't be serious."

"He's really lost his mind."

"You're a disgrace, Ulrich!" shouted a man from the crowd.

"What did you say?" Sara asked.

"You are far gone. You used to be a swordsman we were proud of. Now, look at you! Going around with witches and claiming you're a woman! You're delusional!"

People cheered in agreement.

"I *am* a woman! And I'm still a sword fighter!"

"I bet you couldn't defeat anyone now!"

"Then why don't you join me in a duel and see it for yourself?"

The man cowardly retreated.

"That's what I thought," Sara said, tossing the scroll away. "All of you! I know who I am, and I don't need to prove it to you! The reason you admired me is for my fighting skill—and that skill hasn't changed at all. If anyone has the courage, come forth and see for yourself!"

"I'll take your challenge," said a man in the back.

The surprised crowd made way for the man to go through.

"...Bruno?"

"That man is right," Bruno replied. "You are far gone, Ulrich. You've spent so much time with those witches, you've forgot who you are."

"Bruno..."

"I challenge you to a duel."

"Don't threaten me with a good time."

"To death."

"...What?!"

"You've heard me."

"Bruno? How can you say that?! After all we've been through, you are willing to... kill me?!"

"The Ulrich I know is already dead. All that's left is... this. I don't even know who you are."

"..."

"Are you afraid?"

"I'm not! But it doesn't have to end like this!"

"I'm giving you the chance to defend yourself, which is more than you deserve."

Sara let out a sad sigh.

"You leave me no other choice. Farewell, brother..."

Both unsheathed their swords, and immediately began to exchange attacks as people hurriedly made way.

Sara knew she was fighting for her life, and that desperate situation gave her new strength; she managed to defend herself from the barrage of blows Bruno dealt, and when at last she saw an opening, she disarmed Bruno, sending his sword far away.

Sara placed her sword next to Bruno's neck.

Bruno closed his eyes and accepted his death.

But Sara took a step back instead.

Bruno noticed nothing seemed to happen, and opened his eyes again.

"Curse you, Ulrich!" Bruno shouted. "You defeat me in duel, then deny me an honorable death?!"

"You're not my enemy, Bruno! Your hatred is my enemy. And that's not something I can slay with a sword..."

Sara turned to the crowd, and raised her sword to the sky. "And let it be known! I'm Sara! My name may have changed, but I'm still the best sword fighter of this kingdom!"

Sara sheathed her sword and began to walk away, when she remembered Julia's words.

"Never let your guard down in a duel, no matter who your opponent is."

Sara looked back and saw Bruno had picked up his sword and was charging at her at full speed. She barely had time to dodge and draw her sword again to defend herself from Bruno's attacks. But he was too angry to fight properly, and Sara easily disarmed him a second time.

Sara picked up Bruno's sword before he could, and walked away with it.

"Give me back my sword!" Bruno yelled.

Sara looked back at him.

"It's just a piece of metal."

Chapter 13

Aftermath

Bruno was sitting in the field where he and Sara used to train.

"Excuse me."

Bruno turned around in shock, and saw a hooded figure.

"Ulrich?!"

"Ulrich is no more."

"Who are you? What do you want? And how did you know you could find me here?"

"So many questions. I have simply come to return what you own."

The hooded woman took a sword from her cloak. Bruno looked closely and verified the sword was his own.

"How did you..."

She took off her hood, revealing a familiar face.

"You! The leader of the witches!"

"Saying 'Julia' is much quicker."

Bruno placed his sword near her neck.

"So you intend to kill me with the sword I brought back to you? That's rude."

"What have you done to my friend?!"

"I've helped her see who she really is."

Bruno stared deep into Julia's eyes with a fiery gaze, but he saw no fear in her.

At last, he backed off and sheathed his sword.

"Get out."

"Not yet," Julia replied. "Since I've gone through the hassle of coming to this place just to deliver your sword, I'll ask you a favor

in return."

"A favor? You have the gall to ask me a favor?"

"Battle me."

"What?"

Julia drew her own sword from underneath her cloak.

"...You must be joking."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

Bruno charged at her; Julia calmly defended herself and seized the first opportunity she saw to disarm him.

"One who's consumed by hatred can't make good use of their skill," she pondered.

"Who *are* you?"

"Julia is my name, as you know. As for who I am... that's a deep question. How could I know?"

"Don't play games with me. How on earth can a witch be so good at sword fighting?"

"I used to be a sword fighter when I was young, like Sara and yourself."

"That's ridiculous. A sword fighter? You?"

"You don't believe it, after what you've just seen in battle?"

"It must be a trick from a witch."

"Bruno, if there was a potion that made you good at this, I assure you we would all be participating in tournaments."

"..."

"Like I said, Ulrich is no more. But Sara is alive and happy. The one who refuses to see they're the same person is you."

Julia started to walk away.

"...Wait."

"What is it?"

"Take me to your place."

"Why? So you can come in and slaughter us all?"

"I want to talk to Ulr—to Sara."

"I can arrange that, but only if she also agrees to it."

"...That's fair."

"And you'll have to go unarmed."

"Hell no!"

"The last time you met, you both had your swords, and you almost killed each other."

"..."

"If you want to speak to her, those are the conditions. Three days from now, if she has agreed to speak with you, I shall meet you here by noon. If you are unarmed, I'll take you to the place where you'll meet Sara, who will also be unarmed."

"Do you expect me to trust the words of a witch?"

"No, but you might trust the words of a sword fighter."

"..."

"Or not. You're the one who asked to see her."

"Wait. Fine. I'll meet you here in three days..."

* * *

"Julia, where have you been?"

"Hey Sara. I've had an errand to run."

"Did you happen to see a sword that was in my room? I can't seem to find it..."

"You mean, Bruno's sword? I've just returned it to him."

"You... what?!"

"That's the errand I was talking about."

"And you just decided to do that without even letting me know?"

"That sword wasn't yours. You've done well in disarming Bruno when he was too angry to wield it, but at some point it had to be returned."

"...So you've met him?"

"I did."

"How did it go?"

"He said he wants to talk to you."

"Really?"

"Yes. I've told him that it will only happen if you agree to it, and if it does, neither of you will be with your swords."

"..."

"I must give him an answer in three days. I thought that would be enough time for you to think."

"Are you seriously suggesting that I meet with a man who tried to kill me?"

"He's also your childhood friend."

"Julia! Why are you taking his side?!"

"I'm not. What he did is inexcusable, and if I were in your place, I know I'd feel the same way. But now, there's a chance for that

friendship to go back to how it used to be, if you want to make that happen."

"...You think so?"

"Yes."

"How can you be always so certain of things? You never say 'maybe', 'I guess', or any of that. If it was anyone else, I'd say it's reckless..."

"All I can tell you is I've seen a man who truly misses his friend."

"..."

"The choice is yours. Think it over."

* * *

"..."

"..."

"..."

"...I'm sorry," Bruno said.

"That's what you say when you step on someone's foot," Sara replied. "You tried to kill me. Not only did you drag me into a duel to death, you even attacked me from behind after it was over."

"I know. I won't try to justify what I've done. It really can't be justified. I just wanted to let you know I deeply regret it, and I'm thankful that you've spared my life, even though I don't deserve it."

Bruno stood up.

"Wait," Sara asked.

He sat down again.

"Why did you do that, Bruno?"

"I really shouldn't have."

"I'm not asking you to beg for forgiveness. I'm just trying to understand. Why?"

"...Julia said you're still the same person you used to be."

"Of course I am."

"But that can't be true. You've... changed, Ulrich."

"Don't call me that again. Ever. My name is Sara."

"How can you say you're the same person when even your name changed?"

"That's the only thing that changed."

"You're also saying you're a woman now..."

"I am a woman. But I've always been."

"You don't look like one..."

"Yet. The potion takes time to work. Besides, there's more than meets the eye."

"..."

"I haven't changed, Bruno. I've just found out who I am."

"...Is that so?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

"I thought I had lost you. I thought those witches had taken you away from me."

"Bruno..."

"And in the end, I did lose you, but I'm the one to blame."

"That's not true. I'm still here."

"..."

"What difference does it make to you if I'm a man or a woman? You're my friend either way, right?"

"...You're still willing to call me friend? After all I've done?"

"Honestly, I just want things to go back to how they used to be..."

"You too?"

"But you have to understand that I'm a woman, and that my name is Sara."

"...There's still a lot I don't get about this. But if this is what it takes for you to be happy, then, so be it."

"Brother!"

"Sister."

Sara's face brightened up.

"There it is," Bruno said.

"What?"

"That smile. The one I haven't seen since we were kids. I told you before, that's all I wanted to see."

The two hugged.

"I should really thank that Julia lady for bringing me here," Bruno said.

"Yeah, me too."

"I was really surprised to find out she's also a sword fighter."

"I know, right? ...Wait. How do you know? She didn't happen to challenge you to a duel, did she?"

"She did..."

Sara laughed. "Oh, Julia..."

"You know, her fighting style is *identical* to yours."

"You think so? I've been practicing with her for a while now, so maybe that's why."

"...I have to say, though," Bruno said, after a while. "This whole situation is a bit weird."

"Yeah, I know it's gonna take a while for you to adapt because you've known me as a man and all that..."

"No, I mean. I'm friends with a woman now."

"...Really? *That's* what you're worried about?"

"I'm not sure how that works."

"You really are a lost cause, Bruno..."

"And you really haven't changed... Sara."

Chapter 14

The waterfall

"Julia. Can I talk to you?"

"Sara. Of course."

"Thanks to you, I feel that I've come a long way..."

"You truly have. I'm proud of you, Sara."

"Thank you. And now, I think it's finally time to let go of this."

She opened her hand to reveal a rusty medal.

"This is the medal I've got in the very first tournament I've won," Sara explained.

"Why are you giving me this?"

"Because it represents everything people thought I was, but wasn't. It's the symbol of a past I want to leave behind..."

Julia came closer and put her hand under Sara's open palm. But instead of taking the medal, she closed Sara's fingers around it.

"So you think you can run away from your past?"

"...What?"

"Sara. When you understood who you are and decided to join us, you've embraced your future. When you accepted the fact the potion would take a long time to work, you've embraced your present. Now comes the hardest of the three... you have to embrace your past."

"How do you expect me to do that? Everyone thought I was something I wasn't! Is that the past you want me to embrace?!"

"That's your past, Sara."

"This medal has a name that isn't even mine!"

"Then scribble over the name. But keep the medal."

"And why do you want me to keep it, Julia?"

"Because of what it represents. You have to make peace with your past, Sara. Even if it's a painful one. Even if it's one you'd rather forget. Otherwise, it'll just haunt you forever."

Sara let out an exasperated sigh.

"So you want me to make peace with my past? That's rich, coming from you. You've never even breathed a word about yours!"

"..."

"You know what, Julia? I'm sick of this. I'm sick of your high-and-mighty attitude. Do you think you're perfect? Do you think you know everything? Do you think you're better than me?"

Sara walked away.

"Sara!"

Julia closed her eyes and let out a sad sigh.

* * *

"Laura..."

"Hey Sara."

"Um... where's Julia?"

"Oh, she's off to that waterfall again."

"The waterfall?"

"Yeah, there's a waterfall she goes to when she wants to think. Who knows what she's thinking about. She's never even told me where it is..."

"...Is that so?"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Wait, actually, I remembered I have some errands to do... Can you take care of things here?"

* * *

Sara found Julia sitting on the grass, staring at the waterfall.

"Julia..."

"Hello, Sara."

"I'm sorry. I know you come to this place when you want to be alone, but I was worried about you..."

"I appreciate your concern."

"And I know I'm probably the last person you want to see now, but..."

"On the contrary, I'm glad you came here."

"...You are?"

"Take a seat."

Sara sat down on the grass by Julia's side.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Julia said, after a while.

"Yeah..."

"You know, I used to come here with her..."

"Who?"

"My predecessor."

"I remember you said something about that before. She's the one who taught you about the potion, right?"

"She taught me so much... And all that she taught me, I'm trying to pass on to you as well."

"Julia..."

"I know I'm not perfect, Sara. I'm painfully aware of my shortcomings. But I'm trying. I'm trying my best..."

"I'm sorry, Julia. I shouldn't have said any of that. I didn't really mean it..."

"I know... But I need to say this. If there's someone who thinks I know everything, it's not me, Sara. It's you."

"...What do you mean?"

"You've been treating me like some sort of enlightened oracle from day one. It's true that I've been through all that you're going through, and that means I can give you plenty of advice. I've had a lot of time to think about how to do that, too. But did it ever occur to you I don't have all the answers either? Do you realize that even then, I don't always know what's the right thing to do?"

"Julia... I understand now. I always hated how people saw me only as some sort of mighty sword fighter, but I ended up doing pretty the same to you, seeing you as some sort of mighty sage..."

"..."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm to blame for this, as well."

"What do you mean?"

"My predecessor... She was like a light beacon in my life. That's what I've been trying to be for all of you. Especially you."

"Especially me?"

"I told you before. You remind me a lot of myself when I was younger."

"I thought that wasn't a compliment."

"It wasn't an insult, either."

"...Thank you, Julia."

"I know it hasn't always been easy. I know I've been very strict with you when you were learning about the potion. I know I've made you face a lot of uncomfortable things about yourself..."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

"...I knew you would say that. Still, it means a lot. Thank you, Sara."

"What was she called?" Sara asked, after a while. "Your predecessor."

"Actually, I named myself after her."

"Really? Wait, so that's why you said you didn't mind if I took your name?"

"I couldn't complain when I did the same."

"Where is she now?"

"After she sent me away to teach about the potion, I've never seen her again..."

"I'm sorry to hear that..."

"But the older I get, the more I understand her. I'm seeing things through her eyes now. So I'm constantly with her, in a way..."

"That's sweet."

"...There's a reason I never brought up my past, Sara."

"It's okay. You don't have to. I imagine you've been through a lot in your life, and if you don't want to talk about it, it's only fair."

"That's not it. I've seen things... wonderful, inexplicable things. You just wouldn't believe it."

"What are you talking about? Of course I'd believe you, Julia."

"Thank you, but some things you just have to see with your own eyes. But I know you will... one day."

"This place really is beautiful," Sara said, contemplating the waterfall.

"We can come here whenever we want."

"Really? I thought this was your place. Isn't this where you go when you want to be alone?"

"It was our place. Mine and Julia's. But now, I'd like to share it with you."

* * *

Sara and Julia were contemplating the waterfall, as they had made a habit of doing by that point.

"Say, Julia."

"Yes?"

"How come you've never got married?"

"I'm not interested in that."

"What do you mean?"

"Love, romance, and all that comes with it... It can be beautiful, but personally, I'm not interested in any of that."

"So that's an option, too?"

"Of course."

"...I like that."

Julia pointed at the waterfall.

"The flow of the water is one of the many things that can't be changed. But what if it could? What if, somehow, this waterfall reversed its course, and its water started to go up?"

"...Julia, what are you talking about?"

"Never mind that. I'm just rambling on."

"Julia," Sara called, after a while. "There's something I've been meaning to tell you."

"Yes?"

"I admire you. I hope I can be like you one day."

"Careful what you wish for."

Sara laughed. "Okay, maybe not *literally* like you."

"I'm flattered, Sara... but you should do the opposite of that."

"...What?"

"A time will come when you'll want to act like me, and you'll try to remember everything I've ever said to you. Don't do that, Sara. Follow your heart—it's a much better guide than your memory. And in doing so, you'll find out that we're not really different, you and I."

"...Thank you, Julia."

"Sara," Julia called, after a while.

"Yes?"

"I also have something I've been meaning to tell you. Would you like to be my successor?"

"Your... successor? You mean, like your predecessor chose you, you're choosing me now?"

"Yes. But whether or not you accept it is your choice."

"I'm honored that you'd even consider me... But if it's for the sake of teaching about the potion, why not choose Vivian? She would clearly do a better job."

"Vivian and Laura are made for each other, and Laura belongs in her farm."

"So you're choosing me because I'm not married."

"I'm choosing you because you're the right person for this."

"But what would I have to do, exactly?"

"My predecessor sent me far away so I could teach about the potion... Likewise, when the time comes, I too would have to send you off."

"...So we'd have to say goodbye?"

"Not right away. But eventually, yes."

"I don't know, Julia..."

"I thought the same when Julia chose me. But if I hadn't accepted, I wouldn't have had the chance to meet all of you. We wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

"...And without your help, we may have never figured out who we really are."

"You have the chance to be what I was for all of you, Sara."

"But still, I'd miss you all so much..."

"And you think I wouldn't miss you, Sara?"

"...Julia?"

"It was hard enough for me to say goodbye to Julia and all my friends back then... If you accept being my successor, I'll have to say goodbye to you too. I know it won't be easy, but that's just how life is."

"..."

"But like I said, it's your choice as well."

"I accept."

Chapter 15

Fateful day

Several years had passed since.

"Hey Laura," Sara said.

She was visibly taken aback.

"...Laura? Why are you staring at me like you've seen a ghost?"

"Because I have..."

"What?"

"You look *exactly* like Julia when she was younger."

"...Really?"

"You've joined us... six years ago, right?"

"Yes."

"You've really grown into a beautiful woman, Sara. I guess I never really noticed until now."

"Thank you... But do I really look like she did? Do you think it has to do with the potion?"

"We've all taken the potion, but you're the only one who looks like her."

"...Laura. You're not suggesting... I mean, that can't be. Both of my parents are dead."

"I'm not suggesting anything. It's a striking similarity, though."

* * *

"Ladies!" Julia called, while they were having lunch. "Three days from now, it will be 20 years since the fateful day I met Laura, and all our lives were changed forever..."

They all cheered in agreement.

"And on that day..." Julia looked at Sara. "I must send you off to fulfill your duty as my successor."

"So the time has come?" Sara asked.

"I'm afraid so... Gather everyone you care about, Sara. It's time to say goodbye."

* * *

Sara and Julia were ready to leave, and everyone was gathered to see her off.

"Bruno," Sara called, giving him a hug. "My childhood friend... my brother. Thank you for being with me all this time..."

"Look at you," Bruno said. "I can barely believe I've known you as a man before... I'm proud of you, Sara."

"Thank you, brother. You've handled the whole 'being friends with a woman' thing just fine. I guess you're not that much of a lost cause after all..."

Bruno laughed. "Thanks for everything, sister. Good luck on your journey!"

"Lily," Sara called. "You too have been a very close friend to me. Whenever I needed someone to talk to, I knew you'd be there for me. Thank you so much."

"Sara, that's the least I could do," Lily replied. "You've helped me find my courage... And you, too, have been a wonderful friend I could always count on. I'll miss you so much..."

"Vivian. I'll never forget everything you've taught me. You've taught me all there is to learn about the potion. You've taught me to read. But above all, you've taught me how to think rationally, and even that being a bit skeptical is a good thing sometimes."

"Sara, you too have taught me a lot," Vivian replied. "You've taught me to see sword fighting as a matter of art and skill, rather than violence. And you've shown me something I had already seen from the others: that true nobility has nothing to do one's bloodline. Go forth, Sara! If anyone can do this, it's you!"

"Laura. You're the reason all of this started. If I had never heard your speech, or if you didn't invite me to your farm, I might still be drinking outside of some tavern wondering what's the matter with me..."

Laura laughed. "I told you before, I'm so glad we started to do those speeches. They've led me to my princess, to Lily, and at

last, to you... I'll never forget you, Sara. And I'll never forget all you've done for us."

Sara looked at Julia. "Let's go!"

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" Julia asked.

"Huh?"

Julia gave Sara a hug.

"You're like the daughter I've never had. I wish I had more time with you..."

"Julia..."

Julia started to cry.

"I'm sorry," she said, after she had finally calmed down. "I was supposed to be strong at a time like this..."

"Screw that!" Sara exclaimed. "I'm glad you're actually showing your feelings, for once..."

Julia wiped away her tears.

"Thank you, Julia. For everything. I owe it all to you."

"Sara..."

"Look!" Sara showed Julia a rusty medal whose name had been scribbled over. "I haven't forgotten anything you've taught me. Not even the hard parts. I'll always keep this with me as a good luck charm."

Julia smiled.

"Come on, Julia. Let's go!"

Both of them mounted on Julia's horse, and went.

"I recognize this way," Sara remarked. "Are you taking me to the waterfall?"

"Yes. There's so much I've never explained to you, Sara. But that's because I wanted you to see it with your own eyes. Today, everything will be made clear to you."

The rest of the journey went on in silence, while Sara wondered what Julia meant.

"This place..." Sara said, when they arrived. "It seems... different."

"It's so quiet, isn't it?" Julia remarked.

"This waterfall is usually really loud..."

"Have a closer look."

Both approached the waterfall.

Julia gently passed her finger through the water, leaving droplets suspended in the air.

"The waterfall!" Sara cried. "It stopped moving!"

"This is what I wanted you to see," Julia replied. "And there's more to it..."

Julia unveiled what was behind the waterfall, as if she was opening a curtain. There, Sara could see a small grotto with a large hourglass-shaped rock in the middle, that touched both the floor and the ceiling.

"...What is this place?" Sara asked. "Julia! What's the meaning of all this?"

"I know you have a lot of questions, but I don't have all the answers either. As you can see, this is no ordinary waterfall. Do you know why you're the only one I've ever shown this place to, Sara?"

"I've always wondered that..."

"Because you and I are the only ones that can enter it. Everyone else just walks straight past it as if it wasn't here."

"What?!"

"There's a reason for that, too. We're connected, Sara. And it all boils down to this place."

"We're... connected?"

"My blood runs in your veins."

"So it's true! You're my father! But how? I thought you were dead!"

"I'm not your father."

"...Of course. I'm sorry, Julia. You're my mother, right? One of them."

"I'm not your mother, either."

"Wait, so what are you? My aunt?"

"Sara, we don't have time for this. Listen. Exactly 20 years ago, Laura and I met... And today, I must make sure that actually happens."

"What do you mean? It's already happened."

"Only because we're doing this now. That rock you see there is capable of opening a portal to the past."

"A portal to the past?"

"Yes. And now, we need to open that portal. We need to make sure Laura and I meet."

"'We'?"

"Only the two of us, together, can open the portal. I need your help, Sara. Are you willing to do whatever it takes so the past stays the way it should be?"

"...What happens if we don't?"

"Nothing that happened from that point on will actually happen. I won't meet any of you, and the Galree farm as we know it won't exist..."

"And what do you mean by 'whatever it takes'? What's gonna happen to us?"

"Don't worry. You'll be safe and sound."

"And what about you?"

"I'll be alright... I think."

"You... think? Julia! That's the first time I've ever heard you say that, and it couldn't be a worse time!"

"I've made my choice long ago, for the sake of everyone I hold dear. What about you?"

"...Alright. Whatever it takes!"

Julia hopped into the grotto on the other side of the waterfall. Sara hesitated for a moment, but soon followed.

Julia placed her hand in the upper part of the rock, which started glowing a faint green light in response.

"The lower part, please," Julia instructed.

Sara did the same, and the rock started glowing more. Soon, there was a loud rumble, and the waterfall that was completely still started to slowly move upwards.

"T-the waterfall!" Sara cried.

"Step back," Julia warned.

A small portal began to form in the center of the hourglass-shaped rock, expanding until it obscured the entire rock.

"We did it."

Julia gave Sara one final hug, and distanced herself a bit, keeping both hands on her shoulders.

"No matter what happens," Julia said, "you *must* believe in yourself. You can do this! In fact, you already did!"

"Wait, what do you mean by—"

Julia pushed Sara with all her strength towards the portal.

Sara disappeared into the portal, and soon the portal itself was gone. The waterfall that was moving up became suspended in the air for a moment.

In a split second, Julia leaped out of the waterfall, before it came crashing back down with all its might.

"I made it," Julia said to herself. "Wouldn't want to be stuck in there..."

Julia looked up to the sky and saw the Sun was setting.

"Julia... I finally understand how you've felt. And how much..."

She looked back at the waterfall.

"Sara... I thought I would be the one to help you, but you were the one who gave me strength..."

Julia closed her eyes and smiled.

"I was so lucky to have been with both of you. But of course I was lucky..."

She reached for a hidden pocket in her clothes, and took out an extremely old medal whose name had been scribbled over.

"...I have the best amulet I could ask for."

* * *

Sara found herself in an open field.

What was that? Sara asked herself. *Julia pushed me into that portal! What would she do that for?!*

She looked around, and saw a what seemed to be a man nearby.

"Excuse me," she called. "Where am I?"

"You're in my land. This is the Galree farm."

"The Galree farm?"

Sara looked closely and realized the person she was talking to was indeed Laura, before she had started to take the potion.

Sara remembered several conversations from before...

"You remind me of myself, when I was younger."

"Her fighting style is identical to yours."

"To be honest, I really like your name..."

"Then take it."

"I hope I can be like you one day."

"Careful what you wish for."

"She always talked to me as if I were an old friend..."

"One day you'll be the one teaching about this potion!"

"You look exactly like Julia when she was younger."

"My blood runs in your veins."

"I was surprised to learn we have the same birthday."

"We're not really different, you and I."

"Keep in mind you can change your name later."

"We need to make sure Laura and I meet."

"She just showed up in this farm out of nowhere. Her clothes were slightly wet too."

...And at last, she understood.

"Um... hello?" Laura called. "Who are you?"

"My name... is Julia."

Author note

Thank you for reading this book.

This is a work of fiction, but some elements of this story are rooted in reality. For instance, the feminizing potion is based on conjugated equine estrogens, which are indeed extracted from the urine of pregnant mares, and were a widely used form of feminizing hormone therapy in the past.

Additionally, the name Galree is a combination of the names of two real groups of people from the Antiquity: the Galli, from Ancient Rome, and the Enaree (or Anarya) of the Scythian culture. Both were religious groups of people assigned male at birth, but who took on feminine gender roles and were considered a separate gender category in their respective cultures. The Galli also castrated themselves as an initiation ritual, which should sound familiar.

The waterfall in this story was loosely inspired by the Chinese myth of the Dragon Gate, which involves fish swimming upstream and a waterfall. I didn't even try to elaborate on the mechanism that made that waterfall work: this isn't a science fiction book.

This is clearly a story about trans women, despite the fact that the word "transgender" doesn't appear anywhere in it. Likewise, the sexual orientation of each character should be clear, even though no specific words are used to designate them.

The drive to write this book came largely from my own desire to see more stories of people like myself. Unfortunately, our very existence is deemed too controversial or "political", which explains why we're so underrepresented, even in fiction. On top of that, minorities in general are constantly confined to the role of supporting characters, with at most one representative in a given story, which reinforces the harmful misconception of entire groups of people being completely homogeneous. I wanted

to do the opposite of that, and write the story of several trans women, all of which have different personalities, backgrounds, and beliefs.

Since trans people are so often demonized, it can be tempting to do the opposite and try to present us as saints or martyrs instead. But in reality, we're as flawed as everyone else. I wanted the characters of this book to be people with good intentions, but who quarrel and misbehave as well.

I also wanted to avoid writing myself as one of the characters—I find it extremely annoying when an author does that. Therefore, since this *is* a story about something I've personally been through, I decided to scatter my own traits and experiences through all of the characters, and blend that in with a bunch of others which are not mine. That way, all of them have something in common with me, but none of them are me.

With all that said, I hope you enjoyed!