

## The Witch's Hut

Twilight's prickle was beginning to nip at Anna's skin. She hugged her arms tight around her torso as if in protection of the knarbled trees growing taller and more menacing in the evening light. Striking goosebumps were a reminder that her light tunic wouldn't be enough to ward off night's chill. Times like this she wondered if the bustier girls in the village had as difficult of time staying warm.

"Marybelle! *Where are you?*" she called into the woods.

A nervous hand played with her long braid. One of Papa's biggest pigs had escaped the pen into the village's nearby forest. Anna hadn't expected to chase it for so long. The animal hadn't only succeeded in evading her search; it had also managed to get her lost.

"M-Marybelle...!"

She only called for the swine in hopes to have a companion at this point. Tales of evil fairies, plotting goblins, and roaming bandersnatches raced through her mind. Even knights were fearful of these woods at night; they were certainly no place for a peasant girl.

Cold mud soaked through the bottom of her dress and slapped against her ankles. The last thing Anna wanted to do was spend the night lost in the forest. There was still a chance she could find her way home if she turned back now, but then she risked her father's wrath when he found out she left the pen gate ajar. She didn't know if that was favorable to the woods.

"M...M-Marybe--"

She stopped, seeing a light through the trees. It was warm and flickering: the glow of a fire. As the last of the sun's setting rays vanished behind the mountains, Anna trembled amid the creaking wood. A rustling in the bushes several feet behind her sent her heart to flurry while she turned.

"Marybelle...?"

*Grrraawwgle*

That was no swine sound. Stumbling down the path in fright, she raced toward the source of the firelight. The path opened into a maintained clearing. Trees parted to reveal a humble cottage nestled within the wooded hollow. Looming trees stretched overhead as if to conceal the hut from any prying eyes. A straw roof sat perched on gray walls made from river rock and mortar. The glowing hearth was the only sign of life as Anna broached the hut.

"Hello...?" she called from outside.

There was no horse waiting for its owner. No dog warning its master of an approaching stranger.

Anna knocked. No answer came. Looking over her shoulder to the ominous woods circling the clearing, she whimpered and grasped the door handle. Crime was preferable whatever awaited her in the darkness.

Warmth poured over her when she stepped inside. The cottage's interior was spacious yet cozy. The main living space featured a dining table, a small kitchen, and what appeared to be a crafting table. A crackling fireplace worked on one side to lick the underbelly of a cast iron pot. The scent wafting from the askew lid was enough to make Anna's stomach rumble.

It was the crafting table's contents that concerned her: books, flasks, bags of unknown animal parts, and bubbling cups of fluid boasting arrays of vibrant colors.

Anna froze at the discovery. "*A witch...*"

Tales of woodland devil women weren't uncommon across the country. Those that managed to elude the stake had escaped to the forest to continue their dark magic. The stories may have been used to scare children from straying too far into the trees, but that didn't make them any less true.

Still, an empty witch's hut was better than the clutching trees outside. Anna might have hesitated more if not for the alluring aroma drifting from the crafting table. Letting the door close behind her, she approached the magical supplies.

Two swirling flasks of fluid caught her attention. One glowed green and reminded her of a summer breeze. The other was pink and smelled of sugar. They were intoxicating to the senses in both sight and smell and she wondered if they might taste just as wonderful. Between them and the bubbling stew on the fire, Anna's stomach was protesting its lack of dinner after her long search.

*Which should she try?*