



THE ROGUE AND THE WITCH

Zakkarii Aarlen

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Content Note:

Contains a minor mention of self-deprecating humor about Rubelle's risk-taking and risk of death on page 9.



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The witch's house was remarkably easy to break into—there were no wards, no curses, not even a regular lock on the first window that Rubelle tried to open. He had found the house easily enough. There were only so many known witches in this city, and this one happened to freelance his services. The house was tucked against a cluttered alley that cast pitch black shadows in the night, and the old brick walls were easy to scale without being noticed.

Rubelle wished he wasn't forced to break in. It looked like a nice home. Tiny, but cozy.

But while the Guild had let him leave with his life, Rubelle knew they'd be watching him, and he needed his plan to remain undiscovered. The witch was his only way back into the Guild, so he jiggled the window as quickly and quietly as his fingers could muster before lifting it and squeezing under it. He slid across a desk cluttered with books, papers, and potted plants, and set his feet gently on the floor. There must have been more plants in the lightless room, for it smelled distinctly *green* and the air felt humid. Rubelle wondered if this was the witch's workshop, and began to creep forward.

When his foot fell upon a creaky floorboard, he was proven wrong. Vines suddenly embraced him tightly, his arms pinned against his sides. There was a muffled, sleepy curse nearby and then another to ignite a glowstone. In the warm glow of light, Rubelle watched the witch stagger out of a narrow but comfortable-looking bed. He held back a snicker as the witch tripped on his covers, and decided to enjoy this moment since the vines were definitely not budging anytime soon.

The witch—Rubelle finally had to admit he couldn't remember his name—had long, fine hair that was a pale feathery mess around his head. His nightgown rumbled in a way that implied he was slender of build, and Rubelle caught a glimpse of pink marks on the backs of elegant hands before the witch used them to push his hair out of

his face and over his shoulders.

"What is—Rubelle?" the witch sputtered, squinting at him in the low light. "What are you doing here?"

'He knows my name,' Rubelle mused, momentarily distracted. His codename with the Guild was the Gambler, and while the witch had been frequently employed by the Guild for his skills in plant magics, Rubelle didn't remember giving his actual name to the man.

The vines shook him.

'Ah, right, he asked me a question.' Rubelle cleared his throat and put on as charming a smile as he could when plants chafed around his bare arms. "Good evening! Sorry to burst in on you like this, but I've need of your services and discretion is critical. I had intended on sitting downstairs quietly until morning, and I deeply apologize for disturbing your rest."

To Rubelle's surprise, the witch sighed and the vines loosened before disappearing in puffs of green dust.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time one of you lot have come in through the window..." the witch muttered as he slid on a dark green cardigan. He picked up a pair of black leather gloves from a nearby side table and tugged them on. "Come on, then. I'll make us some tea and you can pitch your job to me."

Rubelle happily followed the man down the steep, cramped stairs, pleased he wasn't being kicked out...yet.

"Have you heard the news about me?" he asked. "It's only been a couple of days, but if you've worked with the Guild enough to know my name, then I'm sure you're aware that my Guild membership has recently expired."

The initial reply was an odd expression on the witch's face. A pale sliver of light from a glowstone street lamp illuminated a blushing mixture of disappointment and embarrassment.

"I've heard," the witch said, turning back around. When

he reached the ground level of his home, he began lighting the glowstones around his home.

This was the workshop Rubelle expected earlier. It was full of plants, jars, bottles, and overflowing cabinets crammed with books, papers, and, naturally, more plants. The witch pushed a stack of books aside to reach a pair of cups in one of the cabinets.

"I've heard the Gambler was evicted after greedily trying to steal a valuable treasure, and wound up releasing an evil Elven spirit instead. I don't know why you would come here, though."

"Isn't it obvious?" Rubelle said, and perched his butt against a counter since the only seats in the room were occupied by books. "To seal the aforementioned evil spirit. And get my room back at the Guild. The rent around here has gone up drastically since I joined. If there's anyone I should rob, it's landlords."

"Tell me about it," the witch snorted. He disappeared into his kitchen and after a few minutes, he returned and handed Rubelle a cup of tea that smelled herbal and bracing. "Why me, though? We haven't worked closely together in years, and I doubt you have much coin on you, given your title of 'Gambler'. Do you even know my name?"

Rubelle flinched, caught. "Ah, your name did escape me. Been a bit hectic the last couple of days, you see...But I don't gamble *money*, that's not the reason for my codename."

"My name is Fennel."

"Pleasure to meet you, Fennel."

"Charmed," Fennel said dryly. "Do you have coin? If I'm to potentially break my connections with the Guild and do something possibly illegal, I'd like it to be worth it. You look like you've been sleeping in an alley since you were kicked out. Are you sure you can afford me?"

"I've seen better days, that's certain," Rubelle said, and

pushed a hand through his disheveled black hair. His dark-colored sleeveless tunic and pants were covered in dust from crouching in alleyways on his way here. "The Guild let me collect the few things I possessed, including my coin purse, which was honestly quite kind of them. But all I've left to my name is the clothes on my back."

"And the reputation of your name," Fennel added. "Your specialty is risky contracts no one else will take, and there's usually explosions or chaos in the aftermath. So, again—why should I help you?"

"I'll pay you what I have," Rubelle said. "I'll also put in a good word to the guild leader for your services when it's over. She's a reasonable sort. I'd like to believe it's why I'm still alive, and that maybe she doesn't fully believe I was at fault."

"*Were* you at fault?" Fennel pressed. He set his teacup down, reminding Rubelle to sip his lukewarm tea. It was as strong as it smelled, but tasted good.

"I did open the sealed pot I was contracted to pilfer from a black market goods dealer instead of bringing it back intact," Rubelle said, shrugging dramatically. "But that's because I was *told* to open it, and this is the part that no one believes me on. I was set up, and now there's a body-stealing evil spirit masquerading as one of the Guild's top members, while no one has seemed to notice this but *me*."

Fennel's eyebrows, which were darker than the rest of his hair and made his face all the more attractive for it, rose towards his hairline. "Possession, you say? That's quite a pickle for the Guild. But, last I checked, I'm just a witch, an unlicensed practitioner of plant related magics. I don't deal in exorcisms."

Rubelle waved a hand. "It'll be less an exorcism and more of a forceful eviction, and to make that happen, I require plant magic. I have this all planned out, I promise."

"And what about your aforementioned tendency to cause explosions and chaos? I heard the fire at the Garavanti Casino took three days to extinguish."

"That was not my—" Rubelle paused. "Ah. Actually, it was my fault, but it was purely an accident. I tripped on the edge of a rug and grabbed a candelabra on my way down. It turns out no one had aired that poor rug out in decades, because it immediately caught fire. Besides, can you really feel sorry for a place that turned out to be an underground drug laboratory? Why, my little fire removed a good chunk of crime in this city!"

"It also burned down the adjacent restaurants and bakeries, putting a lot of innocent people out of work and business."

"I—" Rubelle faltered. "I am truly sorry for those, at least. Most of the chaos I leave in my wake is purely a consequence of the contracts, which, as you've mentioned, are usually exceptionally risky and dangerous. But that one was purely an accident."

Fennel shrugged his shoulders. "It's fine. The city ordered the casino to pay out to the surrounding businesses as reparation for tainting the neighborhood with crime, and I found a different place to get my scones for breakfast. I'll help you."

Rubelle blinked. "You'll help me?" He had expected to continue the back-and-forth for a while longer. For a freelance witch, potentially breaking business ties with the Guild was a tall order, and he expected the pushback. But it still felt too easy.

"I owe you a favor, though it's not exactly the same value as this endeavor." Fennel began preparing another pot of water for tea in the tiny kitchen off to the side of the workshop. "But you're going to pay me, so it'll even out."

"A favor?" Rubelle slid off the counter and joined Fennel by the sink. "What favor are you returning?"

Fennel refused to meet his eyes, cheeks tinted pink even in the faint light through the window. "It's fine if you don't remember. It was a small favor, but meaningful to me nonetheless. Now, what's this about a possession, plant magics, and a plan to fix it all?"

Fennel's dodge tickled Rubelle's curiosity, but it would have to wait. He followed Fennel back into the workshop while they waited for the kettle to boil.

"After I was booted from the Guild, I naturally had to find out how things went extremely bad for me," Rubelle started. He tried to perch on the counter again but Fennel shooed him off to rescue some crumpled papers. He settled for the arm of a chair, the seat of which held a potted fern. "When I was given the contract, the instructions were delivered to me by Cardanza, one of our top performing rogues who gets the more lucrative deals, the ones that don't risk burning down entire casinos. He specifically told me to open the vase and retrieve the item inside, not bring back the vase itself.

"I thought the contract was odd because the target was a high profile black market goods dealer from overseas. Cardanza himself had spied on the fellow to gain intel for this mission, which was given to us by a government official on the downlow. That part wasn't unusual, but this type of contract isn't usually my...forte."

"Right," Fennel said dryly. He left briefly to fill their teacups with tea and water. This time, Rubelle accepted the cup with the intention of drinking it while it was warm.

"You and I rarely ever work together," Fennel continued, "but I know you do things...loudly. You're not the one called in for low profile work. You get the desired results almost always at a cost to yourself or, like the casino incident, to someone's property."

Rubelle glanced at the scars that laced up and down his arms. The tight skin of the one residing on his right cheek began to itch. He shrugged.

"What is the flesh if not a temporary container for the soul? I've no one to write home to, anyway. That's why it's better if I take on the risky business."

"And why you're called the Gambler," Fennel muttered with a frown as he stirred sugar into his tea.

"Yes, so it was odd that I was given this contract to retrieve a piece of contraband from a black market dealer," Rubelle continued. "Cardanza gave me the details of where it was kept, told me to retrieve the item from the vase, and return to headquarters without being detected. I did my absolute best—I did have to knock out one guard, poor lad—but made it to the vase undetected. It was sealed with only paper over the lid, so I opened it easily. And then—"

"The spirit inside escaped," Fennel finished. "Because some Elven tyrant was so evil that death didn't rid the world of him, so he was sealed away instead. He must have been sealed away centuries ago, though, because I've never heard of such a person."

"I haven't, either. But you see that Cardanza is the most suspicious here, don't you?" Rubelle stood, the frustration coming back to him. "I tried to tell the guild leader, but she wouldn't believe me. Not with Cardanza and his spotless record standing there with a stone blank face as he lied to her, and said I was instructed to bring the vase *unopened*, and that my *energetic* curiosity had gotten the better of me."

"And then you were kicked out."

"And *then* I snuck back in. Like hells was I gonna be booted out without finding out what happened. Because it disappeared, you see. The spirit." Rubelle began to pace. "When I opened the vase, it vanished with a cackling laugh, which was such a horrid cliché that I didn't realize what had happened at first. But it must have stowed away on me when I returned to headquarters with the empty vase, because when I was spying on Cardanza, I found him conversing with it. He was trying to bargain with it, but the spirit didn't care. It just possessed him instead."

"Just as I turned to leave, I saw it, a weakness! Our headquarters is mostly underground, but the housekeeper insists on adding homey touches to the interior, like potted plants that don't need light to live. The spirit stumbled against a side table that had such a plant on it. I saw the spirit detach from its unwilling host for a moment, as if it was repulsed by the plant. It managed to cling to

Cardanza's body, but I think—"

"—that you can use me to create a plant cage around the spirit, extracting it from its host and trapping it in another vessel," completed Fennel. He raised an eyebrow as Rubelle sputtered, his momentum stolen. "What? It's a very obvious plan. The only way you could get away with this one is if you weren't spotted."

"I wasn't spotted! I might not be the best at stealth missions, but I can be very quiet when I need to be, and not even the guild leader knows of the entrance I used."

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes. In fact, I used it to play a prank on her last year for Fool's Day, and she still mentions how she never figured out who put a tickle worm in her bed."

Fennel shook his head. "Well, I *am* capable of what you're asking for. It comes with a great deal of risk, though. Unlike true druids, who can materialize plants out of thin air, I have to work with pre-existing greenery. If I'm to make a cage out of vines, they'll need to spring forth from somewhere."

He moved to a cabinet, opened it, and dug around. "Let's see, I know I've got one somewhere...ah, here it is." He held up a fist-sized ball of knotted vine. "I'll need to make more of these, but it won't take long. We would need to place these at various points and from them I'll be able to summon vines to form the cage."

"Excellent!" Rubelle clapped his hands. "I watched the guild for the past couple of days. Spirit-Cardanza hasn't left headquarters yet, as far as I've been able to tell. He's probably taking some time to get used to Cardanza's routine and learning about the Guild's secrets before doing anything devious, but I doubt he'd need much longer. Cardanza was notoriously simplistic, the man had zero hobbies to speak of. However, there's a room that Cardanza visits every day for meditation, and it just so happens to be where my secret entrance leads to. It has plenty of hiding spots for both us and the knots."

"When will we sneak in?" Fennel asked.

"Tomorrow-uh, today, I mean. Cardanza meditates at noon and skips lunch, the monster."

"Then I guess I better start making more knots." Fennel picked up a potted plant, one that had twisted stalks like the knot. At his touch, the stalks began to loosen and curl towards his fingers. "So much for getting more sleep tonight..."

Rubelle wilted. "I'm very sorry about this. I don't know if anyone within the Guild has allied with the spirit or not, or if he has someone watching me. I'm a loose thread, after all; Cardanza probably expected me to get executed, not banished. I'm very thankful for your assistance."

"Like I said, I sort of owe you a favor anyway. And you're paying me *everything* that is in your coin purse."

The plant Fennel moved had been taking up a chair, so Rubelle took its place and watched the witch move around the workshop. As his shoulders relaxed for the first time in a couple of days, he wondered what favor it was that Fennel owed him, but before he could ask, he found himself blinking awake through a warm blanket of sleep.

'An actual blanket,' Rubelle realized. A woven blanket had been draped across him as he had slept. It smelled pleasant, like flowers.

The witch's workshop had transformed through the night. Early morning sunlight now streamed in through the windows, and the plants seemed to be taller, perkier. Dust motes sparkled in the sunbeams, and what looked like a strange, chaotic mess in the darkness now looked like a comfortable home for creating spells in. A pile of vine knots sat upon one of the counters; apparently Rubelle had missed the entire crafting process. That disappointed him, as he found the way wizards and mages worked with magic fascinating.

A sizzling sound and the smell of cooked meat teased Rubelle into getting up and walking towards the kitchen. Fennel's almost-white hair glimmered in the morning light

as he hummed under his breath. His posture was relaxed as he worked, the features of his face soft and pretty. Rubelle's greeting died upon his lips as the cozy, warm, and simply *domestic* aura of the scene suddenly left him speechless. He couldn't remember the last time someone had made him—and only him—breakfast, or any meal at that. He felt both an indescribable emotion that threatened to overflow and a yawning emptiness, a conflicting tangle that he didn't know how to decipher.

"Good morning," Fennel said when he spotted Rubelle. "You were sleeping so soundly that I wasn't sure if I should wake you. I figured there was enough time to let you sleep and eat some breakfast before we head out."

"Thank you," Rubelle said, coming to his senses. "I appreciate it. I guess the events of the last couple of days finally caught up to me."

He laughed, but it felt weak even to him. The Guild had been his home for so long, and being abruptly evicted had left him stranded. He had originally snuck back in to try and convince the guild leader of his innocence in private, but stumbled on Cardanza instead. Fennel had guessed correctly that he'd been sleeping in an alley; he'd been too worried that the spirit would hunt for him.

To hide his vulnerability, Rubelle nicked one of the small sausages from Fennel's plate with a deft hand and popped it into his mouth. Fennel squawked and batted him away with a gloved hand. Rubelle dodged with a chuckle even as the meat burned his mouth, but it was worth seeing the witch's cheeks flush pink again.

"Your plate is over there," Fennel muttered, gesturing with a gloved hand.

"Sorry, didn't see it," Rubelle teased. He picked the plate up and shoved another sausage in his mouth. "What are the gloves for? Magic channeling? Dunno how any of that works myself, I've the magic capacity of a rock."

"Depending on the rock, it could have enough capacity to store a spell," Fennel replied. He sighed with the air of someone long resigned to a repeated explanation. "I was

born under a cursed star, and was marked as such with brands on the backs of my hands. Those with keen magical senses can still tell they're there, but the gloves help reduce staring and warding gestures."

Recognizing the topic to be undesirable, Rubelle shoved some eggs into his face. "I see. Well, depending on what part of the city I'm in, I also get warding gestures made at the sight of me. So, how many vine knots did you make?"

"A total of ten. I don't need that many to form a cage for one person, but I wasn't sure how large the room was, so I made enough to cover a large area."

"Excellent thinking, my dear witch!" Rubelle exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "The room happens to be a fairly spacious cavern, larger than your home's first and second floors combined. I'll be able to dot the room with them so it won't matter where he walks, he'll still enter the trap."

Fennel flushed again and ate his food without saying more. Rubelle used the chance to steal more glances at him, and decided he rather liked seeing the color on Fennel's cheeks. He desperately hoped his plan succeeded. He was beginning to like the man more than he should.

—

They discussed variations on the plan and back-ups of back-ups on the way to the guild headquarters. Rubelle was determined to keep Fennel out of harm's way and his role a secret should Rubelle fail. The idea of the kind, cute witch getting wounded or captured by a misled rogues guild was upsetting, and Rubelle swore an oath to himself to not let it come to pass no matter what transpired.

The pair made their way through Rubelle's secret entrance, a dirty, dug out tunnel that they could barely squeeze through. There was a brief moment of peril when Fennel started sneezing, but when Rubelle peeked through the exit, he found the meditation room empty. The tunnel entrance was high up on the cavern wall and hidden behind a ledge in front of it, making it undetectable from the floor of the room. Rubelle's guess

was that it was an old water channel that used to be a waterfall, but dried up long ago. There were several such water channels throughout the headquarters, such as the one that filled a small pool below their hiding spot.

"Do I want to know how you discovered this passage?" Fennel asked dryly.

"If your guess was that it was an accident that caused me a degree of embarrassment, you'd be correct, my dear witch," Rubelle replied. "Nearly twisted my ankle right off when I fell into it above ground. You stay put, now."

Rubelle swung over the ledge with the sack of vine knots slung around his neck. He managed to gracefully lower himself down the wall until he could safely drop without rolling his admittedly delicate ankles. The guild headquarters was silent, water trickling into the pool being the only sound, but Rubelle knew that he had to work quickly and quietly, so he held his tongue for once as he began placing vine knots around the room. Besides the pool, the cavern had several lounge cushions and low tables spread about the floor, along with an altar against one wall for those of the guild with divine oaths or convenient faiths. The natural stone walls were mostly bare except for a colorful woven hanging that was new to Rubelle, and likely thanks to the housekeeper.

The potted plants that once decorated the room were gone.

'Well, it's good that we brought our own,' he thought, sticking a vine knot under a table. 'Fennel said it would take too long to commune with plants he didn't raise. He has to make friends with them first since he's not a druid.'

He quickly placed the knots in a loose circle, putting one in the pool for good measure. There was one knot left when his ears picked up a whisper of a sound, the barest hint of a hard edge sliding along leather. Rubelle took his empty hand out of the sack and turned around with a relaxed posture.

"Cardanza! Good to see you, how have you been?" he said, loud and cheerful. "Little early for your midday

nap—I mean, meditation, yes?"

Not-Cardanza smiled coolly at Rubelle, a giveaway that the man was still possessed. The real Cardanza would have slit his throat already with the drawn dagger.

"And what is the Gambler doing here?" Not-Cardanza said, his words as frosty as a winter breeze. "Come to ply your sticky fingers for more game funds? Must be quite the addiction to steal from the Guild again."

"Why, you know I've not touched a game of cards in years! Unless, of course, you're not Cardanza, hm?" Rubelle taunted. "Everyone in the Guild knows what my codename is for. You'll have to do better than that, Evil Vase Spirit."

The spirit contorted Cardanza's face in a mask of fury. "My name is Farcinaron vi Iugissi, you pathetic little worm. Now tell me what you know, and perhaps I'll let you keep your miserable life as one of my flesh vessels."

"That's an odd way of flirting with me, Farci. If you wanted to get inside my pants, you just had to ask politely." Rubelle rolled his eyes dramatically while quickly assessing the situation. Farcinaron was less than three feet away from him with the dagger poised in a stance that was unfamiliar to Rubelle. They were close to the wall where Fennel waited, but without the remaining vine knot in place, Farcinaron was just out of optimal range of the closest knots for a full cage.

'Time for one last bet.'

Rubelle gifted Farcinaron with his widest, cheekiest grin. "By the way, who are you again? You said your name as if I should recognize it, but it's not ringing any bells. Faded into obscurity a long time ago, have you?"

Farcinaron snarled and lunged with the dagger. Rubelle twisted to avoid it, but the initial clumsiness that he witnessed the other day was gone, and he quickly found himself in a deadly dance. Farcinaron must have been a master of blades in his time, because the footwork was beyond anything Cardanza could do. Then Rubelle spotted

the opening he hoped for. He shoved his hand in his sack and closed it around the vine knot.

"Now!" Rubelle called, thrusting the knot at Farcinaron while ignoring the slide of cold metal into his side.

The normally stoic Cardanza's face in a gobsmacked expression was a hilarious sight as the knot exploded in a writhing mass of vines. Two of the hidden knots nearby did the same, and as Rubelle staggered backwards, they enveloped Farcinaron's vessel entirely. There was a bizarre cry of agony that sounded like two voices howling out of synch, and between the gaps of the vines, Rubelle could see the after image of Farcinaron's soul vibrating in and out of Cardanza's body as it was repelled by plantlife in all directions. Rubelle chuckled as footsteps rapidly approached from the connecting hallway, then felt the familiar fuzziness associated with blood loss.

"Rubelle!"

Fennel's face appeared over him, which surprised Rubelle because he didn't realize he was already on the ground. Fennel's face was red with the exertion of climbing down the wall and his eyes watered with desperation. There was something going on near Rubelle's stomach, but he didn't feel like looking. Fennel was a much more pleasant view, though he didn't like the fear on the witch's face.

"Oh, now I remember the favor," Rubelle said as the memory finally surfaced. "The gloves. I gave you those gloves. We worked together with a few others on a large-scale mission once."

"The Arraggia Extraction, yes," Fennel said, distracted by whatever he was doing to Rubelle's midsection. He brushed his hair away from his face, leaving a trail of blood on the fine strands.

The Arraggia Extraction was a rescue mission that took the Guild nearly two months to set in place. It was a success, but someone had gotten injured, much like Rubelle was. He didn't catch the entire exchange, but Fennel's help had been refused, on account of the

wounded not wanting "those cursed hands" to touch them.

"Here," Rubelle said as he handed Fennel his gloves. "Now they won't touch you. Now stop being a little shit and let the kind witch patch you up."

The wounded warrior, another hired hand for the operation, had spat at them. "I ain't catchin' 'is curse, don't touch me, ye freak!"

Rubelle hit the man over the head with the broadside of his sheathed dagger, and the man's head lolled to the side, unconscious.

"I can't heal concussions," Fennel had said, bemused.

"That's his problem. He probably won't even remember what hit him. He won't remember me taking these from his pockets, either." Rubelle held up a handful of jewelry, nicked from the would-be thief's pockets. "Do the gloves fit? You can keep them. Sorry, they aren't very fancy."

Fennel slid the gloves on, hiding the pink brands on the backs of his hands. He gave Rubelle a shy smile, barely visible from under his large, brimmed hat. "Thank you. This...means a lot."

Rubelle blinked as the real Fennel, not a memory, came into focus again. "Oh, I'm still alive, am I?" he said with a great amount of relief.

Fennel smiled. "Yes, you fool. You're going to need a real healer, I've run out of plants to pull from and healing magic isn't my strong point as it is, but I've at least repaired the internal damage. As long as you don't go somersaulting or climbing into windows, you'll be alright enough to get by."

"What if it's your window? Will you catch me if I tumble through it?" Rubelle grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. "I'd love to see you in your nightgown again, it was quite fetching..."

A dark red flush blossomed across Fennel's face as a familiar clearing of throat interjected.

“Rubelle, nice of you to drop in,” the Guildmaster said. The petite, stocky woman somehow loomed over Rubelle’s prone form as if she were a giantess. “I can gather what happened based on the screeching spirit we walked in on, but I’d like a full report before I let you back into the Guild, if you don’t mind.”

“Actually...” Rubelle’s eyes flicked back to Fennel, who was hiding his blushing face behind gloved hands. The gloves were indeed the same from before; more worn, perhaps, but obviously well cared for. “I think I’d like to retire for good, if you don’t mind. I think my *gambling* days are over.”

The Guildmaster raised an eyebrow. “As you wish. I’ll even give you a proper severance package as thanks...and for keeping quiet about this. If word got out that an imposter successfully duped the Guild for several days, our reputation will go in the gutter.”

She gave Fennel a hard look, and the witch fanned his hands.

“My lips are sealed,” he said. “As long as the Guild continues to employ me despite my involvement in this...?”

“The Guild would prefer to keep you on our roster of contractors, yes. Your services have proven useful time and again, and now we know who to call if undead Elven warlords make trouble.” The Guildmaster sighed and shook her head. “Besides, I’d bet five coppers that this was all Rubelle’s idea, anyway.”

Rubelle simply winked at her.

— Epilogue —

With his coin purse heavier than it was that morning and a bag of scones, Rubelle and Fennel returned to the witch's home. As Fennel placed cups of tea on a recently cleared table in his workshop, Rubelle fought off thoughts of the consequences brought about by retirement from the Guild. He was slightly less penniless but still equally connectionless, and more importantly, without employment. He cursed his bad habit of not keeping in touch with external associates; it was honestly a miracle he had even remembered Fennel and his skills in plant magic.

'Think of a plan later,' he told himself as he bit into a scone. *'It's not like I'm completely useless.'*

"What will you do next?" Fennel asked, unknowingly ruining Rubelle's attempt to ignore his predicament.

"Get a job, probably?" Rubelle shrugged. "I'm sure there's plenty of construction work thanks to the casino incident. It'd at least help ease my guilt of wrecking the area."

"Ironic, truly."

Rubelle noticed that Fennel had removed a glove in order to eat his scone. The twisting brand on the back of it was raised, like a pink scar, but far neater than any blade could have created.

"May I see it?" Rubelle asked without thinking.

Fennel paused, scone halted before his open mouth. "My hand? I...suppose you may."

He put the scone down and held his hand out to Rubelle, who held it with his own. Fennel's skin was paler than his, which was marred by tiny scars from scratches and calluses. He stroked the skin with his thumb, not caring

about the slight bump of the brand, then raised Fennel's hand to press the knuckles against his lips. He heard a soft, sudden inhale of breath and rotated the hand so he could kiss the palm.

"Thank you for helping me," Rubelle murmured, meeting Fennel's hazel eyes. "I'll admit, I don't wish this to be our final meeting together. I'd like to get to know you more, if you don't mind."

Fennel swallowed nervously, eyes darting from the hand still caught in Rubelle's grasp then back to Rubelle. "I...I don't mind at all," he said. "I can...think of another way to thank me...if you'd like..."

"I think I *would* like it, and very much."

The scones were finished quickly and the climb up to Fennel's bedroom was done with as much haste as the steep, narrow steps would safely allow. When Rubelle kissed him, Fennel responded with such a sigh that made Rubelle hold him tightly, lest the man swoon and fall before the fun began. Their lips moved together in a leisurely pace that Rubelle rarely experienced, but hoped he'd get to enjoy on a regular basis in the future. Soft pants and moans were music to his ears as he gently removed layers of clothing from their bodies. The room felt hot and stuffy as Rubelle trailed kisses down Fennel's exposed chest, nipping and sucking at soft planes and gentle curves, a pale canvas with plenty of room for pink blushes and little bite marks.

"How would you have me, my dear witch?" Rubelle asked, finally pulling away so he could loosen his belt. His tunic was already gone, exposing his scarred torso and the faint, intentional scars under his chest.

"Inside me," Fennel panted. He looked debauched already, his hair a wild mess upon his pillows and his cock standing at attention. "I need you inside me. There's oil on the bed stand."

Rubelle chuckled and located the jar, a pretty purple bottle that smelled of spice and a flower he couldn't name. "Do you make your own? This smells quite pleasant. I'm

afraid it'll just be fingers, by the way, I don't have the appropriate gear on hand at the moment."

"Top drawer."

Rubelle raised an eyebrow. Inside the bed stand's drawer was a vine knot—but in an unmistakably phallic shape. He grinned as he picked it up and inspected it.

"My, aren't you exceedingly talented, my dear." He gave into a sudden compulsion and gave it a long lick with his tongue. It tasted faintly of plant, but it wasn't unpleasant. Fennel moaned as he licked it again to tease the flustered witch. "Am I right to assume that I should place this upon my groin, and you'll create a custom-fit harness for me?"

The answer was an enthusiastic nod. Rubelle laughed and hastily shucked his boots and pants. He did as he described and when the phallic vine was placed over his dark colored bush, the ends of the vines grew and wrapped around his hips after a few muttered words from Fennel. With a couple of slight adjustments, he felt quite comfortable, and *definitely* aroused.

"Well, let's get to my payment of thanks, shall we?" Rubelle said. He stroked oil onto the vine cock, enjoying the way his hand could twist and jerk around its length.

"Yes, please," Fennel begged. He grabbed his thighs and lifted his legs, his hole pink and winking at Rubelle in invitation. He sighed in pleasure as Rubelle ran oil-slicked fingers across and inside it until it was pliant.

"You're so gorgeous, I could spend all day devouring you, my pretty witch." Rubelle guided the cock inside, and gave Fennel a moment to adjust after bottoming out. "Would you like that? I owe you a good amount of *thanks*, I feel. Maybe one day isn't enough...can you close up shop for the rest of the week?"

Fennel keened, lifting his legs back higher as Rubelle thrust his hips against him in a slow, agonizing pace.

"I could take you anywhere you'd please. In the kitchen, on your workbench, against the door as hopeful clients

are turned away by the closed sign on the other side.”

A heated gasp was followed by legs wrapping tightly around Rubelle’s waist. The reward was a snap of hips, a delicious thrust that felt just as good for Rubelle as it did for Fennel.

“And if you wanted to switch, to take me on my knees, you’d only have to say the word, and you’d have me. You can drink as deep from me as you want, fuck me as hard as you want, make me cum around you as you spill inside me. Would you like that?”

“Yes, Ru-Rubelle, yes,” Fennel cried. His legs were straining to pull Rubelle even closer, until Rubelle finally tumbled forward and nearly knocked their heads together. Fennel clung to his shoulders, urging him to move with his hips. “Rubelle, I’m close, please—”

“Cum for me, my dear, *fuck*, you’re squeezing so tight, cum for me, gorgeous—”

Fennel came with a stuttered cry. Rubelle pressed a flurry of kisses over his face and neck during his come down, then pulled out slowly.

“Can you release the vines, my dear?” Rubelle asked as his fingers fumbled around the makeshift harness. “I’m on the edge myself, I just need a little push...”

The vines loosened and the cock dropped to the bed, but before Rubelle’s hand could do its job, Fennel’s slim fingers beat him to it. Rubelle’s head fell onto Fennel’s shoulder as he was stroked to completion by a deft skill that left him desperately hoping there would be a repeat in the near future. When the sparks in his eyes cleared and the blood stopped roaring in his ears, he rolled off of Fennel and did his best to fit on the narrow bed together.

“You’re very good at saying ‘thank you,’” Fennel said, still out of breath. “Yes. I think more thanks *are* in order. I can’t close the shop, but I think we mentioned the high price of rent?”

“Yes, they’re high indeed, and me without a roof,”

Rubelle laughed, equally breathless. “You offer a place to stay? I think I may need more than a week to show my gratitude. Maybe two. Or three. Should I start thanking you again?”

“Just give me a moment. It’s, ah, been a while, I’m afraid I’ve gotten rusty.”

“Likewise, my dear. But, if you don’t mind, I will shake off the rust with you.”

Teases and laughter slowly transformed into soft gasps and moans. Rubelle wasn’t used to leisure, nor having a reason to stick around. But as Fennel kissed him and intertwined their fingers, he felt he could get used to it, and that retirement would suit him perfectly.

~ End ~

Acknowledgements

As usual, many thanks to Cheeki, who once again put up with my insistence of using words in old ways that makes spellcheck want to throw me off a cliff.

And, many thanks to you, reader, for signing up for my newsletter. I hope you enjoyed this little story. You're welcome to respond to any of my newsletters with questions or comments, or email me directly at zakkariiart@gmail.com. Thanks!



Zakkarii Aarlen is an artist and author that likes to tell stories and play games. They love the fantasy genre, making characters smooch each other, and cookies. They live with their bestie and missing sock, Cheeki, who frequently has to hold Zakkarii's leash as they try to rocket off with a million creative projects. If you're reading this, it means she's failed again.

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