



The Purple Rose

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For our husbands and children
Who were there every step of the way

The Letter

A thick yellow-brown envelope was just lying in the middle of the floor. With machine-written, clear, and cursive letters, it said 'Lark'. Nothing else. No address, no surname. Just Lark.

Carefully, I picked up the letter. There was no stamp of any kind. The letter had not been delivered by post, so I did not know how it had ended up on the floor. The envelope was not glued together, but the flap was closed. Slowly, I unfolded a yellowish piece of parchment. It did not smell old, like I imagined it would; it smelled like flowers.

Now, I found myself with a long text written in the same tidy font as was on the envelope. I sat down on the edge of the bed and started reading.

The Myth About the Three Witches

A lifetime ago, the Red Witch ruled over the Floating World. There were the humans in Kriga and the magical creatures in the Borderlands. The different beings all lived in separate countries, only separated by a river.

Everything seemed peaceful between the two countries, but despite that, it was not acceptable to mix with each other. The humans did not understand magic, and the magical creatures were often met with skepticism and resistance when they tried to show themselves in Kriga. The

Red Witch got both countries to accept each other, and it stayed like that for many years.

The Red Witch gave birth to three girls. Beautiful girls. But, the strange thing was, nobody knew who the father was, because the Red Witch lived alone with her girls and servants in the castle. Rumors were that the father was someone from the Borderlands.

The rumors increased, and a rebellion arose among the people of Kriga. The Red Witch was dethroned and thrown out the gates. For many years, no one heard any news about her because she ran away with her daughters.

A young man was elected by the people to reign as king of Kriga, and the Borderlands became a closed area where people were not allowed to go. The new king soon had a son with his beautiful queen, who died giving birth. After that fateful day, the king changed, and he was never himself again. The King showed himself less and less outside the castle, and his most trusted advisor took over more and more of the King's tasks.

The King's son had grown up, and one day, like so many others, he rode to the Golden Lake, but that day, a very pretty girl was sitting by the edge of the lake. Her name was Rosia. She had long, wavy, red-golden hair and beautiful jade green, almond-shaped eyes. Her gold summer dress sparkled like the lake when the sun's rays hit the surface. Instantly, the King's son was taken with her.

Rosia was not unaffected by his interest in her. Flattered, she let him pick flowers for her. It was impossible for the young prince to take his eyes off the beautiful girl, and with every heartbeat, he fell more and more in love with her. When the day was over, they separated, both warm-hearted.

It was not part of Rosia's plan to fall in love with the prince. She was sitting on the rock in the golden glow of the lake so the prince would see her. With her beauty, she planned on making him so blind with love that he, in time, would accompany her to the Dragon Cave. Here, a silver dragon guarded over the Purple Rose.

According to myths, the Purple Rose could grant eternal youth, but allegedly, the Silver Dragon required a royal and innocent sacrifice before it would give up the rose. For that reason, Rosia needed to seduce the prince before sacrificing him to the Silver Dragon.

Rosia was the daughter of the Red Witch, who was dying. She had told her daughters about the magical flower that she so sincerely wanted. Only the Purple Rose could save her. With all her heart, she wanted to recapture the throne; she did not want to close her tired eyes yet.

Every day, the prince and Rosia met. Their love blossomed day by day, making her hesitate to sacrifice him to the dragon, even if the rose could save her mother.

Her sisters grew more and more uneasy with every passing day, knowing that their sister still had not captured the prince. They did not understand

how their plan might fail. Still, Rosia continued to insist that the prince was not so in love that he would accompany her to the Dragon Cave. When the two sisters finally realized that Rosia was in love with him, they were infuriated, and they went to their mother for advice.

The mother was weak and tired, and had no understanding of her daughter's love for the prince. Together, they came up with a plan.

The next day, the two sisters slipped a strong sleeping aid into Rosia's tea. She fell into a deep sleep. Anyone who did not know any better would think she was dead.

The two sisters went to the Golden Lake where they found the prince. They told him who they were and that Rosia was dead. The prince demanded to see her immediately, so they led him to their house in the woods. Here, they showed him Rosia. The tears streamed down his cheeks, and he knelt beside her.

The two sisters told him about the Purple Rose and how it could bring the dead back to life. Miserable as he was over the loss of his love, the prince would do anything to save Rosia. Without much thought, he set out with the two sisters to find the rose.

*

In the meantime, Rosia had awoken from her deep sleep. At first, she did not understand what had happened. But, when she could not find her sisters, she knew something was wrong. She went to her mother's sickbed.

Her very weak mother first tried to hide the truth from her daughter, but she finally had to give in. She told her about the sisters' plan. From sheer frustration and rage, Rosia grabbed her mother's neck and squeezed until she lay lifeless.

Rosia set off to the Dragon's Cave in hopes of catching up with her sisters and saving the prince. She did not catch them in time. Standing on the edge of the cliff, she saw her sisters standing with the prince outside the cave.

The sisters had tied his hands and feet. From the depths of the cave sounded a terrible roar; the Silver Dragon was coming.

There was nothing to do. Devastated, Rosia looked at the prince one last time before she went to hide behind some bushes. She kept her distance because she had a secret. Rosia was pregnant with the prince's child, and a bump was growing in her stomach.

With her eyes closed, Rosia hummed a spell to make the prince fall asleep immediately. In this magical sleep, he would not feel the dragon-fear that was said to be the most terrible feeling of all. It was said to feel as if you were locked in a small, dark, and damp room where only the sound of metal on metal can be heard. The dragon's terrifying stare would drive anyone to madness and make them wish for a quick death.

The two sisters knew about the dragon-fear and had used a spell on themselves to guard against madness. A powerful spell that was hard to control. The two sisters found Rosia curled up behind the bushes with tears

rolling down her cheeks. They were horrified when she told them she had strangled their mother, and that she was pregnant with the prince's child. The sisters dragged her home.

*

Rosia's grief over the loss of her love was huge. She only left her bed to eat, and she never spoke a word to her sisters. Time passed, and her stomach grew. It would not be long before the child came.

Rosia wanted revenge on her sisters, so one day she left home. Not too far from the house, she met one of the king's men. The beautiful girl asked the knight to bring her to the king's palace since she had information about the prince's disappearance.

She told the king everything that had happened. Shattered with grief, the king asked Rosia to stay at the castle so he could watch his grandchild grow up and take care of them both. She quickly settled into the castle, and soon gave birth to a beautiful boy.

*

One night, Rosia was woken by the King's advisor while she slept besides her baby boy. He asked her to follow him to the Throne Hall. There, she saw two women. Bruised and bloodied. To her horror, she realized they were her sisters. Despite never having wanted to see them again, she pitied them. Deep down, she had hoped they had fled far away never to be found.

Rosia begged the King to spare her sisters' lives. The King agreed—on the condition that she married him. The advisor demanded that the sisters became his servants. She saw the fear in her sisters' eyes. The marks on their bodies from the torment the advisor had inflicted on them, and the pain they were in, horrified her. She could not bear the thought of them suffering such a cruel fate. She saw no other way out than to refuse the King's offer.

The King told her that if she did not accept the offer, they would all die. Rosia pleaded with the King to spare her sisters. If he would banish them from the kingdom, she would marry him. The king was just about to agree when the advisor placed a hand on his shoulder. Like that, the king got a distant look in his eyes and firmly said that they would have to die if she would not obey him.

Rosia realized that she and her sisters would not be able to escape without a fight. Whatever happened when the advisor placed his hand on the king's shoulder, she could not match. If she was going to save her sisters from the evil advisor, they would have to escape. She would have to leave her son behind. The king loved his grandchild, as much as he loved his son, so Rosia did not fear for the child's safety. She feared what the advisor might do to the son if he did not get his way. Rosia whispered to her handmaiden to take good care of her son.

The handmaiden left the Throne Room at once. Hoping the King might change his mind, Rosia looked at him one last time, sad and pleading. But, as his gaze remained unmoved and distant, Rosia stepped forward and knelt beside her sisters.

The sisters took each other's hands, and suddenly the Throne Hall was lit up by great flames. The guards began to move toward them, and a few of the maids bolted screaming toward the doors. Fire slowly engulfed the heavy curtains in front of the hall's tall windows. In the middle of it all, the King stood like a statue. The sisters got up and ran toward the Mirror Hall, where they believed freedom awaited. Despite the fire, several of the king's guards followed them along with the advisor. The advisor spat after them in disgust, shouting:

"Oh, so you're trying to cheat me out of a few good slaves. You will not get away with that." He raised his arms, as if gathering powers and magic. Then he pointed at them and chanted: "I curse you. From now on, you will age at twice the speed, and you will never be able to bear children."

Rosia grabbed the pendant on her necklace. Instantly, the stone transformed into a clear vial filled with silver liquid. The sisters joined hands, and Rosia downed the content of the vial. A silver portal opened in front of them.

The advisor stared at them in disbelief and cried out mockingly:

“Fleeing? Well, then I shall curse you so you’ll never be able to return to the Floating World, until you’re as young as you are now.”

With a chilling laugh, the advisor began muttering strange words. One of the girls reached out to grab him, trying to pull him into the portal, too, but she only managed to catch hold of a mirror hanging from his belt. The guards rushed to stop them, but it was too late.

“You filthy swine,” a voice shouted just before the portal closed completely.

The Invitation

After fumbling with the key, I left my apartment and had to race to get to my bike. My hair was in disarray since I had not had the time to fix it. The helmet would have to take the blame. The letter had delayed me, so I worked the pedals furiously so I would not be late.

The mysterious letter was on my mind as I hurried along. Who had sent it? Why me in particular? I was just a regular nineteen-year-old girl. I lived alone in my small apartment in Brittle. It was not very spacious. There was just enough space for a sofa bed and a dining table. That was where I sat and ate while doing my homework. A bad habit I had developed after moving out. At home, my mother would have raised her eyebrow if she had caught me reading at the table while eating my food. Not that I ever cooked big meals, because my kitchenette, which was tucked into one corner of my living room, only had a small sink, a mini-fridge, a toaster oven, a two-burner cooktop, and an electric kettle. So, most nights, dinner was either canned food, ready meals, or rye bread.

My bathroom was placed in the stairwell, which was not exactly convenient. But, the apartment was affordable on a student budget, and it was in a pretty good location, just a 15-minute bike ride from my school. I was studying to become a nurse in Brimstone.

I knew the trade well through my grandmother and my mom. They were both nurses and had worked in healthcare for nearly their entire

lives. We often laughed at funny stories from their shifts during the family's Christmas or Easter dinners, and I loved listening to them. Ever since I was a kid, I had heard them talk about the difference they could make in other people's lives. That is how I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a nurse like them. After ninth grade, I went to high school and after that applied to nursing school.

One perk of becoming a nurse was that I could work evening shifts, which suited me perfectly since I was a type B person, With a capital B. I hated my alarm clock, and the blanket always felt way too heavy and warm, so getting up in the morning was a struggle. I had even placed my alarm clock as far away from my sofa bed as possible just so I would not turn it off in my sleep. It had happened a couple of times since I moved here, and I hated being late.

When I started studying, I still lived at home, so I had not been in Brittle for very long. A couple of months into my program, I turned 19, and my mom and stepdad thought it was time for me to move out so I could get some peace and quiet for studying. My younger half-siblings disturbed me.

My stepdad had been around for as long as I could remember. Since I had never met my biological father, I saw my stepdad as my real dad. My mom once told me I was an unexpected, but welcome, surprise.

Even though my parents lived in Scattletown, just about three miles from my apartment, I missed them in my everyday life. Standing on my own two feet was hard. I had to take care of laundry, grocery shopping, cooking, and paying the bills all by myself. There was not much money left once the bills were paid. I had a few close friends from grade school and middle school, but we did not see each other that often anymore since we were busy with our own studies. On the rare occasion we did meet up, we had go for a night out.

But, that did not happen very often, partly because money was tight, and I was not happy with my appearance. Sometimes I even wondered whether my mom really was my mom since we looked nothing alike. She was very beautiful, whereas I was mediocre. My hair was shoulder-length and mousy brown, my eyes blue, and my nose a bit crooked, long, and bent, like it had just been thrown onto my face. I must have gotten my looks from my dad.

In general, I felt a bit lonely. When I was doing clinical rotations for school, I did not see any of my classmates for long stretches of time. Most of them were older than me, and many already had families and strong friendships, so I did not spend much time with them outside of school. That is why I had started going to a weekly Zumba class to get out of the apartment a little.

Even though it took some effort to show up in a big hall full of women, I went faithfully every week. There were some younger girls, but also older and more mature women. What we all had in common was that we tried our best, and we enjoyed ourselves. Thankfully, the moves did not have to look perfect, which was a huge relief for me, since I often felt like I had two left feet. It did not help that I had a secret crush on the Zumba instructor. Every time he talked to me, I got completely flustered.

The instructor had incredible charisma, and he chatted a lot with the other women in the class. But with me, it felt like he barely noticed I was there. When he did speak to me, I froze and usually just mumble something incoherent. As awkward as it was, Zumba was still the highlight of my week.

I was pretty insecure. When I was younger, I used to zone out and daydream a lot in school. I had imagine stories where heroes went on exciting quests and adventures. Sometimes I was caught completely off-guard by a teacher's question and gave an entirely wrong answer. The class would burst out laughing when that happened. I had blush, but I always laughed and played along. Rather join them than be ridiculed.

My insecurity showed up in other ways, too. Even early on in my studies, I started doubting whether I had made the right choice. After an uncomfortable experience during a clinical rotation in a medical ward, my doubts grew stronger. I had been shadowing a nurse who was giving

a patient a bed bath while on an IV. Unfortunately, the IV got pulled out, and the patient started bleeding heavily from his hand.

Blood sprayed everywhere, and the patient screamed at the nurse in rage. He called her incompetent and all kinds of horrible things. The experience had really shaken me. I still got chills thinking about it. Even though it had gone better with all the other patients, she cared for, I could not shake the fear that one day, I might be the one someone yelled at like that. I told my mom about the experience, but she just shrugged and mumbled something about how that kind of thing happens when you work with people.

The residents, who lived at the Oakfields retirement home, where I was currently an intern, were very old. Often, I had a knot in my stomach whenever I entered their homes. The fear of what I might meet or the fear of doing something wrong made me really clumsy. My nervousness often made me fumble around, and one time, one of the elders scolded me because he was tired of my clumsiness. That had made me think about the situation with the nurse, and I froze completely. I just stood there, listening to his frustration.

My mentor had shaken her head at the situation and told me that the resident probably had a bad day and that everyone had days like that. Luckily, there were good days at the retirement home as well, and since most days were good, I did not mind being there.

Before starting my internship, I always believed that the elders were like those I helped cross the Street, or like those, I met at the supermarket when they could not find the groceries on the shelves. Kind, vibrant, older people. Unfortunately, that was not quite what I experienced at the retirement home. I was scared of getting old and weak. There were days when I did not even know if I could do anything meaningful for them. Yet, I tried to do my job the best I could, so I did not let down the elders – nor my mom.

My mom and grandmother were happy when I chose to go to nursing school. They assured me that it was a solid and safe choice that would make me really happy. However, the perfect surface begun to crack, and I was starting to have second thoughts about my choice. I honestly did not know what I should do.

Today was my last day at the retirement home before a well-deserved summer break. My family had already left for vacation a couple of days ago, because they had gotten a great deal that unfortunately could not be postponed until my holiday started. All of my classmates were going on vacation with their families, and my friends were busy with exams, so I could look forward to sitting alone in my apartment.

A little irritated, I pushed even harder on the pedals so I would not be late.

I was in the middle of checking the pills for Mrs. Hansen and Mr. Jensen when the ward nurse came by.

“There you are, Lark.”

The nurse, who happened to be my supervisor, must have left her office, where she usually drank coffee and chatted on the phone most of the day. She really got on my nerves; she always dumped all the tedious work on me. I often tried to avoid her, but by some kind of magic, she always found me, just like now.

“Lark, we have a tour for the elderly visitors today. Would you be a dear and show a Mrs. Rosewood around? She just announced her arrival. You can easily squeeze it in before your summer holiday, right?”

It sounded more like an order than a question.

I was just about to protest when she continued in that annoying voice of hers: “Do you know her, by the way? She asked for you specifically.”

The name did not ring a bell, but before I could answer, she was gone.

I sighed deeply and tried to remember how far I had come with the pills. I still had three residents I needed to see before my holiday started in three hours. Along with the extra work, my colleague had dumped on me. As always, I had been too nice. If I was going to get everything done, I had have to skip lunch again. I really needed to learn to say no.

It was almost 11 am. I quickly finished sorting the pills, locked the medicine cabinet, and turned to leave the room. Before I could take

the first step, I froze in surprise and dropped the key. About seven feet from me stood a tiny elderly woman, looking at me curiously. I stared back with my mouth agape, momentarily absent-minded. I bent down to pick up the key and rose. The old lady was standing quite close to me, so I instinctively took a step back.

I looked into kind, jade-green eyes. They were intense – full of life and wisdom. Not like the eyes of the elderly I usually cared for. Theirs were dull and tired. Her hair was oddly reddish, and pulled into a bun. It was beautiful, and her gentle gaze calmed me. It was as if my curiosity had been sparked, and I suddenly had an urge to know who she was and what she was doing here.

“I am Mrs. Rosewood, and you must be Lark,” she said cheerfully. Her voice was soft and light.

I nodded hesitantly. I just needed to get this tour over with. I had so much to do before I was off work, and I did not want anything to delay my summer holiday. Quickly but politely, I asked her to follow me.

Mrs. Rosewood followed along kindly while I showed her the lounge, the activity room for dancing and singing, and then through the hallways past the residents’ rooms. While I was showing her around and explaining what it was like living here, I noticed her eyes never left me. I felt her studying every move I made. Even though it made me uncomfortable, I did not say anything. I was too well-mannered for that.

I started to get this strange feeling, that she was more interested in *me* than in hearing about the nursing home. Just before the tour ended, she interrupted me and said, "Listen, you should come visit my sisters and I tomorrow. Come before the sun sets."

I looked at her, puzzled. She really was a curious person. Why invite me to come visit when she did not even know me? Perhaps she was lonely and needed company. I pretended not to hear her.

Shortly, she repeated herself.

I was just about to decline her offer friendly when her eyes met mine. The jade-green eyes, which were buried beneath the fine lines and wrinkles, calmed me and made me change my mind. It was as if my curiosity beat my common sense, the part of me that knew not to go with strangers. It definitely was not a good idea, but her invitation seemed so genuine. I did not have the heart to disappoint her. I did not have anything better to do anyway, and she seemed so friendly. So I repeated hesitantly: "Tomorrow before sunset?"

She felt so familiar, but I did not know from where. She seemed to know me. I was about to ask for her address when she said, "Just follow your heart, and you'll find us."

Mrs. Rosewood and her sisters

“Did you see her?” Mrs. Darkwood asked.

She came from the living room to meet Mrs. Rosewood. Behind her followed Mrs. Winterwood. They practically floated across the floor. Mrs. Rosewood nodded.

“We are *so* excited to hear about her. Come sit and tell us everything. We prepared tea and cake,” Mrs. Darkwood said laughing eagerly.

Mrs. Rosewood sat down on the small, violet couch by the crystal coffee table. “She does not look anything like us...” Mrs. Rosewood began slowly.

“Or her mother. Her eyes are merely blue—not azure, more like dull and boring. Pale... and a crooked nose.”

“What on earth went wrong?” Mrs. Darkwood exclaimed, puzzled. “We were *so* careful when choosing the parents.”

“Well, beauty certainly has not shown itself yet, even if a caterpillar *does* eventually become a beautiful butterfly. Maybe she will turn into a butterfly someday,” Mrs. Rosewood mused.

Mrs. Winterwood nodded at Mrs. Rosewood’s words and added, “So true. Absolutely true.”

“Though we might need a miracle...” Mrs. Rosewood added relieved. “Who knows, maybe the age of miracles has not passed. Maybe we should wait another 19 years?”

“Over my dead body!” Mrs. Winterwood cried. “To stay trapped in this godforsaken, ancient body with these *hideous* folds and wrinkles, hiding my divine beauty?” She placed her fists on her hips and almost shouted, “Never! Put me in the grave instead. We are not surviving another 19 years, especially not when We are aging this fast!”

“I must admit, I shall get real grumpy, if we have to wait another 19 years,” Mrs. Darkwood added. “I was robbed of my entire youth in Kriga. Now I am old here on Earth. Just look at us—we are finished, old and ugly. As Mrs. Winterwood so nicely puts it: ‘We are dead meat—ready for the rats.’” Mr. Darkwood exclaimed. Her body trembled.

“Yeah, the only great things about this place,” Mrs. Winterwood chimed in, “are Netflix and my iPad. At least, they kill the time. Magic does not work properly here, and we always had to hide our powers so as to not stand out.”

Her face was the color of a ripe tomato, and she stomped her foot so hard the floorboards creaked.

“Yes, we always had to hide our powers. Otherwise, all Hell would break loose,” Mrs. Rosewood said. Her voice grew louder with every word. “If *anyone* wants to go back, it is me. Probably even more than you two. I sacrificed everything—and left my most treasured behind—to save you.”

“Stop it right now!” Mrs. Winterwood shouted. Her eyes flashed in anger at Mrs. Rosewood. “It is *your* fault we ended up here, this *disgusting* place you wished for.”

“My fault?” The house trembled, and the teacups rattled in their saucers. “As far as I remember, I wished us far away when my two sisters were about to end up as slaves, far away from the Advisor,” Mrs. Rosewood snapped.

Mrs. Darkwood cut in, her voice now calmer: “Let us all just take a breath. So... when is she coming?”

“Tomorrow,” Mrs. Rosewood sighed, her voice still a little shaky. She straightened her clothes and adjusted the bun at the nape of her neck. The house settled again. “We need to get the last things in order.” She nodded toward the Silver Mirror on the coffee table. “Have you gotten the stone?”

“Yes, he delivered it,” Mrs. Winterwood said with a hint of bitterness. Her silvery hair was untamed, and her clothes just the same.

“And I have already thanked the Silver Mirror,” Mrs. Darkwood chimed in; nervous the sisters might start arguing again.

“Good. Then everything is ready for tomorrow,” Mrs. Rosewood said, glancing at her sisters. Their expressions had softened, and even Mrs. Winterwood’s mouth turned slightly upwards.