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A  
WITCH'S  
GUIDE TO  
LOVE AND  
POISON

HODDER

AAMNA QURESHI

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It was Bisma's eighteenth birthday, which meant it was time for goodbye.

But there were hours until then; she would not think of it now. Instead, Bisma got up from her bed: a soft spread of leaves above a thick branch molded perfectly for her body.

She stood and stretched, looking around the room she occupied in her home, a massive treehouse in the center of the Enchanted Forest. The other girls weren't as comfortable with heights, but Bisma loved the feeling of being above the entire world, so her room was the very highest. It suited her just fine. With seven of them occupying the home (Baji Eva the eldest at twenty-one, and Deebea the youngest at two), Bisma relished the quiet up here.

Walking across the weathered wood floor, Bisma went to the center of her room, where the tree's massive trunk rooted all the

rooms together. She stuck her head through the opening, down the stairs that twisted and turned around the trunk, connecting every portion of their home.

She heard her sisters rising, already bickering over morning chores. Baji's voice rang out clearest as she ordered them all about.

Baji was the title for the leader of their family; her actual name was Eva, but when she became the head, she was called Baji out of respect.

And now it was almost Bisma's turn to become Baji.

Pushing aside the twinge in her heart at the thought, Bisma stepped on to the staircase. Rather than going down to join the others, she went up, climbing onto the roof of her room, then up higher on to another thick branch well above the treehouse. She sat down, pulling her knees to her chest, and inhaled a deep breath of fresh, sweet air, savoring the taste of earth on her tongue.

The first time Bisma had gone into town, she'd eyed the neat homes in the village along the way: little cottages, one or two storey tall. *How boring*, she'd thought. *And stuck on the ground, too!* Her home was a plethora of connected rooms built on thick tree branches on the biggest tree in the Forest, and from up here, they had the very best view.

The sun warmed the sky with color, rising higher and higher, shimmering over the tops of the green trees, turning the leaves a fiery gold. From here, she could see the outline of the glistening Mirror Lake, its waters a perfect bright blue, as though it was a stroke of paint.

To the east, she saw the meandering shape of the Rushing River, the waves roaring white and gray as they dashed forward. Beyond that, she knew the Forest led straight to the Cliffs, which then cut off to the ocean. Birds flitted through the sky, their wings violet and red, chirping their morning songs.

Bisma had known the Enchanted Forest her entire life, but it

seemed there was always more to see, more to explore. Her magical home, the very best place in all the world.

Turning her wrist, Bisma looked down at the mark on her skin, a simple black tree that branded her as an Unwanted Girl. This was what the villagers called her band of sisters, and they had long since adopted it themselves. An unwanted child, Bisma had been left on the outskirts of the Forest as a baby. She was lucky in that sense.

Some of her sisters had similar experiences, but others had come to the Forest willingly, having nowhere else to go. Not all who came were accepted by the Forest, and she had heard the stories of how frightened her sisters had been to plunge into the dark woods, not knowing if they would survive.

But those who were accepted were accepted wholeheartedly; strangers one day and sisters the next.

Bisma listened to the faint sound of her sisters down below. She could hear five-year-old Nori, up to her usual mischief, most probably bothering two-year-old Deeba. Twelve-year-old Azalea would be hiding away from her chores, while nine-year-old Mei would be assembling breakfast with fifteen-year-old Luna.

Inhaling another sweet breath of mossy air, Bisma enjoyed the view of her forest. She stood and walked along the branch, balancing perfectly along the curve until she reached the very end. Bisma did not bother to look down; she simply jumped.

Wind whipped across her body as she fell, and Bisma let out a shriek of delight, unable to help herself. Her stomach gave out as the ground hurtled up toward her, growing closer, closer—Until a branch reached out and caught her. Bisma laughed, hair falling over her cheeks.

'Thanks, Forrie,' she said, as the branch gently deposited her onto the floor of the Forest. The branch waved at her, then slithered back into place in the treehouse.

Bisma sighed, looking up at the house. She didn't want to go in just yet, or she would be stopped a hundred times with baby Dēeba demanding cuddles and Luna wanting to once again ask if she thought the baker's son had told her to have a nice day in a general sort of way or if he'd meant that he specifically wanted *Luna* to have a nice day, a question Bisma had already answered about seventeen times.

But really, she wanted to avoid the cheerful birthday wishes—and the harsh reality that accompanied it. Just a little longer.

Turning her back to the treehouse, Bisma skipped along. Whistling with the birds chirping up above her, she passed the vegetable garden and the chicken coops as she made her way down to the well for a drink of cold water, then meandered down to the stream to wash.

Stripping off her clothes, Bisma bathed in the cool stream, as she had hundreds of times before. She washed her long hair with lavender soap, watching the dark brown waves grow straight and ink-black in the water. The familiar scent calmed her, and she sank deeper into the water.

When she was done, Bisma saw there was a fresh outfit laid out for her on a branch, along with a drying cloth. It was a new dress; she recognized Azalea's hand on it. While the twelve-year-old hated chores, she loved sewing and was always making new outfits for the sisters.

The Forest had brought the clothes out for her. 'Thank you, Forrie.'

The wind whistled in response as Bisma got dressed. The dress fell to mid-calf and fit like a glove. It had short cap sleeves and was in her favorite color: a deep emerald green with black embroidery on the body.

She pulled the strings on the corseted bodice and tied them into

a little bow, then admired the mehndi on her hands. She had applied it two nights ago and it had finally fully darkened.

Bisma twirled, watching the fabric of her dress lift with the movement, then fall back down, as soft as a sigh. She walked over to a still pool of water to look at her reflection. The dress really did look beautiful.

Her dark hair was beginning to dry and curl. Bisma usually let her unruly hair flow freely or tidied it into a simple braid. At most, she would add a string of motia, the sweet jasmine scent staying with her the entire day. But today, she knew Mei would want to do something special. The nine-year-old was always insisting on doing her sisters' hair in complicated fashions they had no need for, and today Bisma would indulge her.

She made her way back to the treehouse, picking mint leaves on the way and chewing on them to freshen her breath. She passed by a burst of sweet rosemary and plucked some sprigs to press onto her wrists, inhaling the lovely scent.

As Bisma walked home, she ran her hand along the wildflowers—pink, purple, orange, yellow, and blue—touching her hand to the soft petals. Sunlight shone through the leaves from above, highlighting all the brilliant colors.

Every bit of the Forest was overgrown and alive, not like the neat squares of grass in the villagers' estates. She had been horrified the first time she saw the villagers of Old Town mercilessly cutting away at the earth's natural beauty.

Finally, Bisma made it home. She looked up at the treehouse, hearing the chaos from outside. She climbed up the winding stairs and entered the main area of their home, which was decorated with cushions in various colors, pitchers filled with flowers, hanging pots and pans, and shelves lined with mismatched teacups and plates.

'Morning!' Bisma said.

All the commotion inside the house stopped.

It was silent for a half a heartbeat, then they all exploded with noise. Six girls shrieked and cried out and tackled her with hugs. Bisma kissed each of her sisters.

'Happiest of birthdays, angel,' Baji said. She held Deeba in one arm, then came to hug Bisma with her other. Bisma hugged her close, and Deeba wrapped her little arms around their necks, squeezing both of them.

'Do you like the dress?' Azalea asked, brown eyes lit up with excitement.

'Let's play!' Nori cried. Her thin, wiry frame jumped up and down, upending her already messy hair.

'Finally, you're here,' Luna said, exhaling dramatically. 'I am *starving*.'

'Breakfast is ready!' Mei said, pointing to the picnic baskets. 'Just need to pack the tea and milk.' She went to the kitchen, where water was boiling on the stove.

'Tch, Mei, leave it,' Baji said. 'Azalea, go help her.'

Azalea rolled her eyes, tossing her brown hair aside. 'I made Bisma's dress! I think I've done enough.'

Baji gave her a stern look, but Azalea was hardly fazed. *Twelve-year-olds*.

'It's alright, Baji, I can do it,' Mei said. She was a thin girl with straight, jet-black hair that was cut short, skimming her chin. Since her hair was so silky, it was hard to do much with it, which was why she loved doing her sisters' hair.

'You've been cooking since the morning,' Bisma said, going over to help Mei. 'Besides, I need you to do my hair.'

'Hey, I helped with breakfast, too!' Luna complained. Bisma sat down on the wood floors so Mei could do her hair and Luna came and sat across from Bisma, dark brown eyes sparkling. She had a

beauty mark next to her lip, and her hair was a deep honey color. 'Haru said not to overwork the batter when you make scones.'

Bisma bit back a laugh. Luna took every opportunity to bring up the baker's son, her latest crush. At fifteen, Luna had a new crush every few months.

'I helped Baji with the jam!' Nori said, bouncing over and dropping into Bisma's lap.

'Oof,' Bisma said, as Nori elbowed her in the gut. Bisma played with the five-year-old's hair, straightening the blonde curls into something resembling neatness.

None of the girls looked similar; they were all different. The closest in likeness were Bisma and Deeba, who both had deep brown skin, but Deeba was a shade darker, and her features were different to Bisma's. Nori had pale white skin, while Azalea had a tawny skin tone, and Mei's was more of a fawn. Luna had olive-colored skin, and Eva's was dark chestnut.

'She really did help with the jam,' Baji said, coming over with little Deeba, who waddled on her own feet.

'Remind me, who made Bisma's dress?' Azalea added pointedly, squeezing in beside Bisma to run a hand along the fabric of her outfit.

'Thank you,' Bisma said. 'It's perfect.'

Azalea beamed with self-satisfaction. The girls all sat together as Mei finished styling Bisma's hair. Afterwards, Bisma looked in the mirror, and she saw her own dark eyes fill with joy.

'It's beautiful, Mei,' Bisma said. 'Thank you.'

Small tendrils framed her face, but the rest of it was pulled back, and Mei had wrapped the braid with a few strings of motia, the little white flowers a stark and striking contrast against Bisma's dark hair. Coupled with the small gold baliyan Bisma always wore on her ears and the freshly dark mehndi on her hands, she looked fit to go to a ball.

'It really does look so pretty,' Azalea said. She batted her eyelashes at Mei. 'Do mine, too?'

'Can we *eat*?' Luna asked, clutching her stomach. 'Haru says the scones are always best when they're fresh.'

Azalea pretended to vomit, then muttered to herself, 'If I have to hear about the baker's son one more time, I swear . . .'

Baji and Bisma exchanged an amused glance.

'Yes, let's go eat,' Baji said. As their eldest sister and leader, hers was the final say.

They gathered up the picnic baskets and made their way down the treehouse, comforting chatter filling the air. Azalea was going on about how she desperately needed new fabric to make a blouse or she would just *die*; Luna was reciting a love poem she had recently read; Nori was hopping and twirling, as hyper as ever.

They walked through the Forest, and Baji pointed out different mushrooms and berries to Mei, who declared whether they were safe to eat or not—something they were all taught when they first entered the Forest. They stopped at a hill with a view of the Rushing River and sat in the shade of an elderberry tree on a picnic blanket that was the yellow of sweetcorn and sunflowers.

Then the girls eagerly set about unloading their breakfast: jars of glistening blueberry jam and orange marmalade, warm crumbly scones, savory egg and spinach pie, lots of toast and salted golden butter, bottles of cold milk and pots of strong black tea, and a vanilla cake with bright red strawberries and thick sugared cream.

'This is amazing,' Bisma said, heart swelling. She looked around at her sisters, feeling nostalgic for this moment already. After today, everything would change.

Her gaze snagged on Baji, whose eyes welled with tears.

Bisma opened her mouth to speak, but Baji gave her a bright

smile, blinking her tears away. As painful as this was for Bisma, she knew it was worse for Baji.

'Let's eat!' Baji declared. The girls did not need to be told twice.

They dug in, passing plates and cutlery and teacups and sugar, eating until their stomachs were full. Then they spent the day playing in the sun.

Around midday, they all gathered back onto the picnic blankets and huddled together to nap, cuddling close and warming one another with their bodies in the cool shade of the elderberry tree. Patches of sunlight shifted through the gaps of the leaves above them as they slept.

When they woke, they ate again, then raced to the Rushing River, splashing each other with cold water. They picked flowers and made bouquets; Bisma made each of her sisters gajre to adorn their wrists. They talked and bickered and teased and laughed.

It was a perfect day. Everyone was on their best behavior—even Azalea—and before Bisma knew it, the sun was setting, the sky shifting from bright cerulean blue to a dark purple.

The sight filled her with terror; she didn't want the day to end. Bisma wished she could reach out into the sky and hold the sun in place, just for a while longer. *Please, just a few hours more*, she implored, but even the magic of the Enchanted Forest could not stop time.

Goodbye was inevitable.

'It's time,' Baji said, her voice solemn and thick. They all grew silent. Quietly, they packed up their things and made their way back to the treehouse, walking slowly, prolonging the end.

They could only put it off for so long. Soon they were back at the treehouse.

It was time for goodbye.

'I'm going to miss you girls so much,' Baji said. No, not Baji anymore—just Eva. Now that Bisma was eighteen, it was time for *her* to become Baji.

'Deeba, give me a hug,' Eva said, crouching down. Deeba was too young to truly understand that this would be the last time she saw Eva. She waddled into Eva's open arms, hugging her; Eva held her close, kissing her cheek.

Then she stood, holding her arms out for Nori.

'You'll be back, right?' Nori asked, face scrunched with confusion. A streak of dirt marred one cheek; she rubbed at it, smearing it further.

'No, sweetheart, remember?' Eva said. Her eyes shone. 'I have to go now, but Bisma will take care of all of you. She'll be your new Baji, and she's going to be wonderful.'

Baji was the title of the head of their family. Like Bisma, on Eva's eighteenth birthday she had been bequeathed the title, and like Bisma, she had said goodbye to her own Baji, a girl named Silke that Bisma remembered well.

Silke would be twenty-three now, but Bisma had not seen her since she had left the Enchanted Forest.

'Come, give me a hug,' Eva said. She hugged Nori, then said goodbye to Mei, then Azalea, then Luna.

'I'll walk with you,' Bisma said. Eva nodded; she turned to the girls, as if to tell them to go up and get ready for bed, then stopped herself.

Eva looked at Bisma, who felt unsteady by the sudden responsibility.

'Girls, wash up and change for bed,' Bisma instructed them, her voice shaking. 'I'll be back. Luna, you're in charge until then.'

Luna nodded, putting an arm around Nori. Mei held one of

little Deeba's hands, while Azalea held her other. With one final smile, Eva blew them a kiss. She looked up at the treehouse—her home—then turned to go. Bisma walked alongside her.

The Forest was dark now, but they could move through the woods with their eyes closed. Moonlight shone down from above. The air was chilly. Bisma rubbed her arms. They walked in comfortable silence until they reached the edge of the Enchanted Forest.

It was time.

Bisma threw her arms around Eva, holding her tight.

'Don't go,' Bisma said, though she knew it was futile. She pulled away, clutching Eva's forearms. 'I'm not ready, Baji. Can't you stay just a little longer?'

'Not Baji anymore,' the older girl replied with a sad smile. 'Just Eva, remember? I'll have to get used to that again. Same as you'll have to get used to being called Baji.'

Bisma released a long breath, eyes filling with tears. It felt as though a piece of her heart was being carved out.

'The rules are the rules,' Eva whispered, her voice wavering. 'You know how the Forest is.'

The Enchanted Forest had a mind of its own. It welcomed girls who were unwanted or had nowhere else to go but with the strict stipulation that the eldest would become Baji on her eighteenth birthday and remain only until the next girl came of age.

In three years, when Luna was eighteen, Bisma would be leaving just as Eva was now. It felt like a cruel punishment, always having to say goodbye.

Things had always been like this, since the Enchanted Forest took in the first girl hundreds of years ago. The rules and traditions had passed down over and over. The girls did not quite understand *why* the Forest had its rules, just that it did, and they needed to obey them.

'Won't you write to us?' Bisma whispered. 'To me, at least? I won't tell, I promise.'

Eva sighed. 'I wish, but you know I can't. None of the elder bajis ever have, and besides, I don't think the Forest would allow my letters to reach you even if I did.'

'But why?' Bisma asked, angry. 'It isn't fair.'

'Darling, if you spend all the time I'm away wishing for me to come back, how will you ever adjust? How will any of the others?' Eva said. 'You need to trust and rely on yourself, so the girls can, too. The system is the way it is for a reason.'

Bisma didn't understand why it was like this, but she did not see the same frustration on Eva's face. Eva seemed to understand why it had to be this way; perhaps when Bisma was done with her tenure as Baji, she would understand, too. But for now she felt nothing but anxiety.

'Now I really must go. Look . . .' Eva said, drawing up her wrist. There was a black tree inked onto her skin; it was the mark of the Enchanted Forest. They all had them, but Eva's was fading fast, nearly gone.

'I'm afraid,' Bisma whispered. Raising five girls under the age of fifteen—caring for them, protecting them, nurturing them—was no easy feat.

'So was I,' Eva said. She squeezed Bisma's arm. 'But you'll figure it out, and you'll have the Forest to help you. I know you can do it.'

But Bisma wasn't as patient as Eva, nor as clever or kind. She loved her sisters, but love was not always enough.

'I have to go,' Eva said. The mark on her wrist was nearly gone now. Once it faded, she would not be allowed back into the Enchanted Forest. She would go and build her life somewhere else, somewhere new, just as the previous bajis had done before her.

Bisma had no idea where any of them were; once they left, they did not stay in the Old Town and they did not return.

'I hate this,' Bisma said, eyes welling with tears. 'I'm going to miss you.'

Eva cupped Bisma's face in her hands. 'We'll see each other again,' she said, her voice a promise.

Hope flared in Bisma's heart. 'Really? How?' Bisma asked quietly.

'I'm not sure,' Eva replied, nibbling on her lower lip. 'But it's what my baji told me.'

'Where will you go? How will I find you?' Bisma had a hundred questions, but Eva just smiled, leaning forward to kiss Bisma's forehead.

'Just trust me,' Eva said, and despite the fear unfurling in Bisma's chest, she did. She trusted Eva with her life. She pulled her older sister into one last hug.

'Be good,' Eva whispered. With that, she walked away into the thick fog and disappeared.

'But that's just it,' Bisma whispered to no one in particular. She stood alone in the quiet woods. 'I'm not good.'