



**Cookies
& a
Witch**

**Short
story
by
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Cookies & a Witch

Much like the World Meteorology Organization named hurricanes, the authors at a sapphic writers' retreat came up with a name for Doomsday, aka the apocalypse. During a panel on *The Four Types of Dystopias* at the Sierra Sky Ranch Hotel in Oakhurst, California, individuals in our group tossed in a ballot box the name they thought best fit the catastrophe that would end the world.

Since most of us had watched the last episode of *Agatha All Along* last night in the lounging room, it wasn't a surprise that Agatha won the majority vote for the title of whatever event would destroy Earth. Miranda Priestly of the *Devil Wears Prada* was a distant second.

The dystopian panel hadn't yet ended when the manager of the hotel rushed across the rustic Great Room and clapped her hands. Flushed in the face and out of breath, the frantic woman gasped. "I just received a message that Agatha will arrive within the hour."

The way her voice shook made it obvious she overheard us come up with Agatha as the code word for the burst of horror that would take our lives and the life of our planet. She then pointed toward several people stacking chairs outside the large windows on the north side of what was once, our peaceful sanctuary. "Sierra Sky Ranch staff is doing all they can to remove obstacles, but there isn't much we can do to prevent the sun's lethal punch."

Another staff member yelled from the lounge above. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but we have an emergency."

Both the manager and the staff member rushed outside, leaving us with many unanswered questions, such as what caused our planet to veer off course and whether there was any chance of survival.

Fear gnawed at the lining of my stomach and pounded on my brain. So that's why we've had record highs lately. It was a blistering 134 degrees in Death Valley yesterday. Earth was about to be obliterated by the sun. Yes, I was panicking. Who wouldn't be?

An eerie hush took possession of the rugged yet comfy room as authors sat petrified. The drumming of a woodpecker atop the roof became louder and louder until it grew thunderous, smothering the sound of sniffles and the shuffling of a chair. Someone was tapping their fingernails, no, not fingernails—the noise came from Gigi's direction. When her nerves were stretched, the queen of drama often clicked the thrust device of her pen against her cheek. Sure enough, as if competing with the woodpecker, Gigi was, jabbing a writing instrument into her face. Click-click. Click-click.

The Great Room quieted, not even the woodpecker made a peep. I glanced around. Above my head was a bold wood beam along a high ceiling. How sad such a thing of beauty would soon be burnt to a crisp. I stared at the fireplace in awe. One wouldn't think it feasible to obliterate dense rock, but it would soon dissipate into tiny particles as well. Not daring to look into the eyes of my fellow authors, I quickly lowered my head to view the rustic pine floor. The fear I knew I'd see in their eyes would have me in tears, and I didn't want to fall apart. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to this incredible hotel, let alone these wonderful storytellers.

In the blink of an eye, chaos erupted. People were vacating the Great Room. Who could blame them? They wanted to get home to their families. Agatha aka the Big Bang was on her

way. Only the authors from Sapphic Publishing, a small but tight-knit publishing house, stayed in place. What else could we do? We lived too far to reach our loved ones in time, and there weren't any deadlines to meet. Not anymore. The last Sapphic book had zipped through a printing press, and advertising and distribution were no longer a necessity. No matter where we are on our beautiful blue planet, the sun will burn us alive.

As Sapphic Publishing's newest author, I followed the lead of my peers and sat in silence. You would be surprised at how little people had to say when faced with less than an hour to live. And yet I wanted to say something. Jumping to my feet I yell, "I will miss so many people and things and, I will miss Earth."

Nancy sobbed. "Agatha might show some of us mercy. At least I hope so."

Damn, I wish Nancy would have brought her home-baked chocolate chip cookies into the Great Room instead of leaving them over in the snack room. Not that I had the stomach to eat right after the verbal terror we consumed just moments ago and were now choking on. I loved cookies and there wasn't a sliver of hope. We weren't going to survive the sun crashing into us. Who'd care if I ate every single one of them? Nobody. Still, I chose to spend my last minutes alive with my author friends rather than gorge on food all by myself.

The Sierra Sky Hotel was rumored to be haunted and, in a panic, I asked, "What will happen to the ghosts when our planet disintegrates?"

Gigi pressed her finger to her temple. "I suppose we the living will join them and manifest into a larger realm of spiritual energy."

"That doesn't sound awful," I replied, although I was still frightened of death.

Harper, our Southern belle, who wrote mostly historical fiction, pulled a comb from her purse and brushed her long gray tresses. A few strands landed on the shoulder of her pink wool sweater. Never before had she been brave enough to groom her frail hair in front of us, let alone act in such an inappropriate way as to do so at the table. Recent warnings about our inevitable demise took away our social worries, apparently. For example, my concerns about being overweight become irrelevant in an instant. We have seen our last nightfall. With our world ending, who'd be left to pass judgment? This said if given a choice, I'd rather be criticized by ill-mannered people than cremated by a thing of beauty such as the sun. At that notion my heart thrummed at such a high speed I couldn't feel it beating.

Senior editor Betty Doge buttoned her shirt sleeves and adjusted her tie. A good appearance brought comfort to some right up to the very end. Personally, I didn't care for the prude. She *strongly suggested* I delete all profanity and triggering scenes with every submission I sent in. Truth be told, I considered going indie as soon as my contract with Sapphic Publishing was completed, but that was a non-issue now. Nothing mattered. Not anymore.

Kai was the first to rise out of her chair. Her short dark pixie hair was slightly gelled in place, per usual. Her enormous hazel eyes, the ones that often winked at me, were shaded by a baseball cap. With slender fingers long enough to please the tenth muse, I realized how excruciatingly hot it was becoming inside the hotel. Were we about to combust out of existence? If only I dared to ask the masc woman out on a date during the seven months I'd known her. Oh well, too late now.

When Kai took a step in the direction of the foyer, Betty yelled at her. "You best stay. You'll die a certain death if you leave."

I turned towards the brightness of the windows. Not a soul was in the yard, not even the staff, but the furniture had yet to melt—an encouraging sign.

At the stairs, before exiting the Great Room, Kai turned to flip Betty off. She had nothing to lose by being exactly who she wanted to be.

Gigi stopped poking herself with her ballpoint pen and took a huge breath to broaden the trans flag on her shirt. “Shut up, Betty. Everything is temporary but death, and we all know, you rich white folk will somehow escape Agatha’s fire.”

Perhaps Gigi said this believing she alone was facing our inevitable demise. As a plus-sized gal who sweats when the temperature rises above seventy degrees, I knew my white ass would not survive the heat either.

“We’re all goners, despite race or gender,” Kai said from the foyer at the top of the stairs. “Nothing or no one can save us from Agatha. The bitch is heartless.”

“Then it is God’s will,” Betty Doge said.”

Gigi let out a puff of air. “What a bunch of poop. If everything was a god’s will. We might as well have sat on our hands with our thumbs up our butts until a higher power directed us to this inevitable point in our lives.”

Nancy slapped her palms on the table. “Who gives a rat’s ass about one’s religion or a lack thereof—no one is making it out of this imminent catastrophe unscathed. It’s doomsday, y’all. We were all told Agatha was coming, but in our infinite wisdom we hung on to our denial.” Nancy pulled out a tube of lipstick and smeared vibrant red across her deflated lips. “I for one, plan to go out in style.”

Trying to convince others to believe as I did was a waste of my precious time. Some people rather bicker than compromise, and coexistence wasn’t possible when so many refused to live and let live. My-way-or-the-highway attitudes and dictators killed the human race way before the sun changed course to take us out. Ergo, I refused to argue. Life was too short, and I planned to enjoy every microsecond. Maybe I should go to the snack room for one of Nancy’s cookies.

Just as I rose from my chair, horns blared, and the screeching of brakes broke the silence. A loud crunching noise seeped through the windows. Out of habit, I glanced at my smartwatch. Eleven-thirty-four a.m. Knowing the time of important events was crucial, even if I wouldn’t be here to write about them.

Screams of horror filled the parking lot. I wanted to run outside, be on the scene. Getting the story at all costs was in my blood, in all of ours I presumed, but our group thought it safer to stay behind the thin walls of Sierra Sky Ranch than venture outdoors.

Our world was about to be gobbled up and digested into nothingness. Agatha was about to strike. I pressed my feet to the floor and braced for the impact. At least I wouldn’t die alone.

From a seat closest to the bar, when it came, I could observe the deadly threat penetrate the windows on the north side of the building, and breathing a second longer than Betty Doge was a win.

The sound of two people conversing in the distance caught everyone’s attention. One voice belonged to a very pissed-off Kai. The other was unfamiliar.”

Nancy tilted her head towards the common room. “That sounds like the ghost of Sarah, she was the nurse who saved many soldiers at this hotel during the typhoid epidemic. She’s the spirit most guests write about here at Sierra Sky Ranch.”

It couldn’t be sweet Sarah. The woman talking was too filled with rage. If anyone, it was a poltergeist stomping their feet and speaking with a husky growl.

As two figures reached the steps leading down into the Great Room, my heart thumped in anticipation, and although I possessed a strong bladder, I crossed my legs. One can never be too safe.

Once they appeared under the light, I noticed next to Kai stood a... a what? Was there a brigantine docked at Bass Lake today? Why else would a stunning brunette wearing a red bandana, a vintage long-sleeved lacy white shirt, and leather pants stuffed inside black boots be here? She was a witch with some kind of pirate-vibe thingy happening. A gorgeous witch, but a witch nonetheless. Perhaps she knew of a way to rescue us?

Betty's grandiose attitude flared. "Out with it. I don't have time for this nonsense. Unlike these promiscuous floozies," she eyed me, then Gigi. "I have important matters to attend."

The witch smirked. "I assure you, Betty Dog, my time is more valuable than yours and I intend to say what's on my mind when I damn well please."

Betty's neck and face turned a bright red at the mispronunciation of her surname.

Gigi let out a snort, then covered her mouth in feigned embarrassment.

Even on her way back to our table, a confident Kai stumbled. She was in awe of the slick-tongued spellcaster, too.

I mustered the courage to gaze at the beautiful witch. We locked eyes. Desire and panic gripped me. Why did I have to be such a lesbian? The sorcerer was captivating and left me besotted. A battle in my head ensued, and the world went silent once again.

The witch forged vocal expressions as my deceptive heart mutated into a percussion instrument, beating with such ferocity, that it was impossible to hear her words. The exotic woman extended one arm and gestured toward the window. Betty scratched her shaved head. Others hung their mouths open, dumbfounded. The witch ranted on, but I couldn't hear a word.

Still deaf with infatuation, I didn't understand what the witch conveyed to my friends. I merely stared at the woman's enchanting gray eyes.

She slapped her palm on the table in front of Betty Doge, knocking me out of my trance. "Goddammit, are you telling me not one of you imbeciles know what time the owner of a piece of shit truck hit my Bentley in the parking lot? Come on, you must have heard the crash." The witch yanked the bandana from her head, allowing long tar-colored hair to fall below her strong shoulders. "Fuck it. I'm done with all of you. You can leave!"

Betty yelled back. "I'm the senior editor. Sapphic Publishing will die without my input."

The witch stood akimbo. "As owner of a dozen flourishing companies, including as of late, Sapphic Publishing, I'm certain my business will thrive without your input, Betty Dog."

I gulped. This take-no-prisoners bandit was the publisher now, the new owner of Sapphic Publishing, and she wanted us all gone? I had the ability to give the hot witch the correct answer, but my mouth wouldn't form the words. What did it matter if the cruel woman fired us, we were all going to die anyway.

As if she knew what I was thinking, she smiled the most beautiful smile at me. Above gleaming symmetrical teeth, her eyes twinkled with inspiration.

To please the extraordinary woman, I stuttered, "Elev-eleven-thirty-four."

Without warning, the buccaneer snapped her fingers, and tempers soared. Kai was yelling and Gigi threw her pen at Betty Dog, or Doge, or whatever the uppity editor's name was. The hotel staff rushed in to settle everyone down. Starving, I worried Nancy would take her delicious cookies as she departed. In a total fright, I tossed my backpack over my shoulders and hurried towards the snack room. Goddammit, I wanted to eat a cookie before I burned alive.

But when I got up to leave, the witch stomped her boot in front of me. "Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

What was with this woman and the F-bomb? Who did she think she was? She was someone who didn't have to submit her stories to Betty Dog, that's who. I tried to look away from her beguiling eyes, but they held me captive. With trembling lips, I asked, "Aren't we all fired?"

The witch folded their arms across her chest. "I don't possess the power to fire any of you, but your friends had a five-year contract with Sapphic Publishing, and their contracts have expired. You, on the other hand, have more than four years to go."

Wasn't the sun about to gobble up Earth? Confused, I asked my fellow authors, "What about Agatha? Aren't we all going to die a horrifying death?"

"Girl, you have a vivid imagination." Harper smiled on her way out. "We all knew our time at Sapphic Publishing was about to end when this heartless business guru took over, but nobody is dying today, darling."

My heart started beating again, and I jumped for joy. "Hooray! Wow, that's great news. I mean, not great news," I eyed the mean witch, then my friends."

Betty spat at me as she pushed past us. "You two deserve each other."

The attractive sea wolf nonchalantly stuck her foot out and Betty fell to the ground.

"Watch where you step," the stunning witch snapped.

Betty Dog grunted as she wrestled with the floor to get to her feet. She rubbed her elbow but didn't say another word before leaving the Great Room.

Gigi wrapped her arms over Kai and Nancy's shoulders. "These writer retreats are always so dramatic. Whose turn is it to buy drinks?"

"Since I'm retiring from my day job next week, I'll buy," Nancy said.

They didn't seem upset about losing their contracts with Sapphic Publishing but why did they abandon me? They left me alone and defenseless against this dangerous witch.

The intimidating woman was a foot taller and bent her knees to get eye level with me. "Are you alright?" she asked as if mystified. "Do you need a doctor? You're breaking out in hives."

I glared at my arms. Sure enough, an angry rash was flaring just beneath my skin. Big red welts popping up everywhere and the urge to scratch them was unbearable. I grabbed an allergy pill from my pocket and tossed it into my mouth, only to have it get stuck in my throat. I gulped and swallowed to no avail.

The witch smirked. "Nod if you'd like some water?"

Still battling with the dryness in my throat, I continued to gulp like a pufferfish plucked out of the sea, but I refused to nod. No way would I allow the sexy bandit to play games with me. I wasn't her pet. Did she think now that she had me alone, she could train me to satisfy her every whim? Plus, she was no Miranda Priestley. A real fashion diva wouldn't be caught dead wearing baggy pants and a lacy white button-up shirt trapped by suspenders. This sea wolf didn't scare me. Okay, she scared me a little. Actually, a lot, and what was with the scar across her eyebrow?

"Can we start over? The beauty dressed in black reached out her hand and said, "My name is—"

I held my palm in front of her face. "Let me guess, it's Agatha." I held my tummy as I chuckled and snorted. "You're the reason everyone voted to name the apocalypse Agatha!"

"Well, did they now?" She grinned. "And you're a romance writer with a fabulous imagination who thought I was a force strong enough to end the world." The witch-slash-pirate winked. "I've been called worse." She placed a cool hand on my biceps, soothing my itchy hives. "You feel warm. Let's get some liquids inside you."

With the pill half dissolved in my throat, I choked out. "I have chronic hives caused by anxiety. I'll be fine. The thing is, now that I know you're Agatha, and the world isn't coming to

an end, I'm not sure I want to work with you." *Eating raw meat might be more enjoyable than having Agatha for a publisher, but then the same could be said for Betty Doge.*

My new publisher bared a toothy smile. "I apologize for being mean to Gigi, Kai, and Nancy, they are wonderful writers when not stifled by Betty and I'll extend their contracts if that is what they want. However, I'm changing the company name from Sapphic Publishing to Sapphic Smut and I doubt very seriously any of them will want to write for *Sapphic Smut*. To keep this company afloat I'm only accepting romantic and sexy thinking wordsmiths who want to continue serving under me."

Under her? I plopped on my seat, dislodging the antihistamine that was stuck in my throat. If only the pill worked faster so I wouldn't look as if I had a lethal disease. *Did she say serving under her?* Of course, being under a woman dressed in leather was appealing, but so was keeping one's integrity. Sapphic Smut, really? Yes, most romance novels have sex scenes, but many incredible romance books also faded them to black, especially Young Adult romances. I didn't write erotica and though all my books have a few sex scenes, I wanted the freedom to write my novels as they were meant to be told, whether that meant adding sex scenes or not.

I smelled champagne and mint as she came within inches of my face. "Smut is forever trendy and Sapphic Smut has become a popular niche. The name alone will attract more readers. I'm running a business. If I fail, all the authors at Sapphic Publishing will lose their home with us. The company is going under."

"Look, Agatha." I took a deep breath to calm myself. "Sure, I might like to cuss and write a sex scene or two in my books, but I won't add sex to a story if the narrative doesn't call for it. Forcing me to write smut in every one of my books makes you no better than Betty Doge."

Agatha cringed, then let out a huff. "The title is merely a marketing ploy. I won't demand authors use cuss words, and we can get away with calling it smut as long as there is at least one small sex scene in every book."

"Hey, I like reading smut as much as the next person, but what happens if I write a book that doesn't require a sex scene?"

Agatha's head shook uncontrollably, and she growled.

She was sexy when she was angry but I wouldn't budge on this issue. "Yes, smut gets the most readers, and naming the company Sapphic Smut will make you more money, but I write many genres and I refuse to limit myself."

Placing her index finger to her chin, the witch appeared to be pondering what I had said. A good sign.

I knew the business guru wouldn't agree, but I suggested, "How about the name Sapphic Narratives or Glamor Sapphics?"

She practically snarled at me. "Sapphic Narratives is boring as fuck. How about Literary Sapphics?"

Shocked at her willingness to not only listen but to work with me, I nodded with enthusiasm. "Aye, captain. I like it." I smiled a flirty smile.

"Well, I'm certainly not the captain of this ship." She laughed. "Be a good mate and walk with me to the snack room. I want to toss some more ideas around with you over a drink."

The amazing hotel staff always kept the coffee and tea canisters filled in the snack room, so we grabbed our cups of brew and sat in the library.

Once seated, I noticed Nancy's cookies on the coffee table. Someone must have brought them in here during the last panel. Although my mouth watered with yearning, I didn't touch a morsel. A chubby author like myself pigging out on cookies didn't make a good first impression.

Agatha pushed the tray of cookies in front of me. "I like a woman with a good appetite."

Was she trying to fatten me up for dinner? Nah, I just had hungry-witch on the brain. I gazed into my new publisher's eyes and mumbled through the cookie in my mouth. "I'm writing a novel about a woman who loves cookies and witches."

"Ah, a witch story!" Agatha rubbed her chin. "Hmm, but witches aren't very popular right now. How about a vampire or a werewolf story?"

"But aren't you, uh. I thought you were a wit..."

The wrinkles between Agatha's eyes told me she was baffled by what I was trying to imply. Obviously, she wasn't a witch. Ugh. I couldn't believe I had allowed my overactive imagination to run wild yet again.

Agatha's dimples deepened and she chuckled with such force, her tummy jiggled.

"I'm teasing. I adore witches. Will your novel have a happy ending?"

"Yes, it will start scary as most horror stories do, but not only will the main character get to devour a bunch of cookies, she'll get the girl in the end, too!"

"Sounds bewitching," Agatha smirked then gave me a wink and a smile.

I swallowed down another cookie and closed my eyes. To think I thought today was the day planet Earth and all its inhabitants would burn to a crisp and die a ghastly death. When in reality, today was the beginning of a love story filled with smut and a very happy ending.