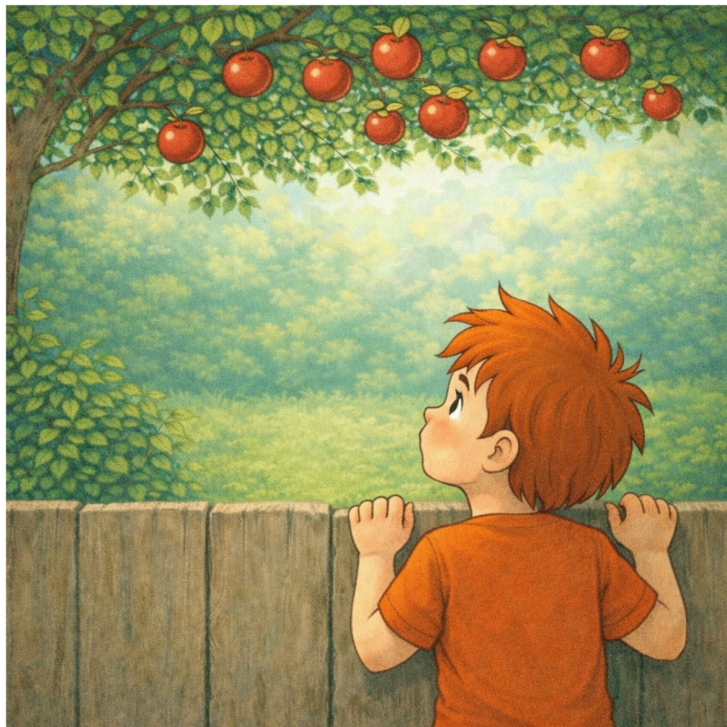
The illustration depicts a scene in a garden. On the left, a large green robe with a brown braided belt is shown, with a hand pointing towards the center. A glowing white circle with a trail of light streaks follows the hand's path. In the middle ground, a young boy with brown hair, wearing an orange shirt and blue shorts, is running away from the viewer with a surprised expression. The garden is filled with green plants, and a wooden fence runs across the background. In the upper right, a tree branch with several red apples hangs over the scene. In the lower right foreground, a single red apple sits on the ground next to a small white starburst.

SAKU
AND THE
THIMBLE
WITCH

Saku leaned up on
his toes and
peered over the
fence.

“Just one apple”,
he thought. “No
one would even
notice.”



No one went
through the
witch's gate.

Saku stepped
inside anyway.

"Just one apple,"
he told himself.



A shadow fell over
him.

Saku froze.

“Well?” said a
voice behind him.
“Is it yours?”



The witch pointed
at him.

“Did you think I
wouldn’t notice?”



The witch's finger
traced a small
circle in the air.

“This will help you
remember,” she
said laughing.

WHOOSH.

Saku was shrinking.



Saku pushed himself up from the ground, shaking.

“You can’t just do that,” he shouted.

“Turn me back!”



Saku stood still,
heart racing.

“This can’t be real.”

Something dark
rolled past his foot.

He flinched — then
saw it was a beetle,
its shell shining like
a polished stone.



Ants marched past
his legs, tall as his
knees.

One brushed
against him,
antennae flicking.

“Easy,” Saku
muttered.



Saku pushed
through the grass
until the ground
opened into a
clearing.

More children were
standing there.

They were watching
him.

One of them said,
“You too?”



A girl stepped forward
from the firelight.

“Hey,” she said quietly.
“You’re safe.”

“I’m Arja,” the girl went
on. “It’s a good thing
you found the clearing.”

Saku nodded.

They made space for
him by the fire.



The fire crackled.

Arja drew a small shape in the ash.

“A thimble. Her hat.”

“I think her power’s in it,” she said.

“If we destroy it while she sleeps, the spell breaks.”

“She never sleeps,” someone whispered.

Arja looked up.

“Then we try while she’s awake.
I have a plan for that too.”



Crickets filled the dark.

Arja stood. She looked at Saku.

“Then we go,” she said. “Just
the two of us.”

No one else moved.

Saku looked at the grass.

His stomach dropped.

“She’ll catch you,” someone
whispered.

The witch’s laugh rang in Saku’s
head.

His jaw tightened.

“I’m coming,” he said.



The crickets were loud now.

“There,” Arja said quietly.

“That’s her house.”

The house leaned out of the ground, with green light leaking through the cracks.

Saku stopped. “She’s awake.”

Arja stared at the light. “The others think she never sleeps.”

They stood still, looking at the hut.

Arja lowered her voice.

“Ready?”

Saku swallowed.

“Yes,” he said.



They edged closer,
keeping to the shadows.

Arja pressed her eye to a
crack in the wall.

“She’s at the table,” she
whispered. “The hat’s
there.”

Saku leaned in.



The silver thimble sat in the green light. On the far side of the table, a glass jar pulsed with thick green smoke.

"I tip the jar," Arja said. "She turns."

"And I grab the hat," Saku said.

"And throw it in the fire," Arja said.

Saku nodded.

Arja held his eyes.

"She might catch me," she said.

Saku stiffened.

"That's fine," Arja said. "As long as you get the hat."



Arja slipped inside.

Saku followed.

They climbed the table leg
together.

The jar stood near the edge.

The thimble gleamed on the
other side of the table.

Arja nodded once. Saku
stepped toward the thimble.

Suddenly, the witch stiffened.

“What was that?” she said.

Hearing the witch's voice again,
Saku froze.



The witch rose slowly.

“What was that?” she said again.

Her eyes dropped to the thimble and
then to Saku.

Her fingers reached for him.

Arja kicked the jar off the table.

It shattered on the floor.

Green smoke burst upward.

The witch turned toward the crash.



The witch moved faster than
Saku expected.

Her hand shot through the
smoke.

It closed around Arja.

"THE HAT!" Arja shouted.

Saku looked at the thimble.

It was right there.

The witch's shadow fell over
him.

Her laugh filled the room.

Saku's hands shook.

He backed away.

"SAKU!" Arja cried.

He turned and ran away.



Outside, Saku kept
running.

The grass tore at his
arms.

He didn't look back.

Finally, he stumbled and
fell.

He sat there in the dirt,
his breath coming in
ragged gasps.



Saku stumbled back into the clearing.

The children looked up.

“Well?” one of them said.

Saku swallowed. “She took her.”

A boy stared into the ash.
“Of course she did.”

A girl shrugged. “That’s what happens.”

No one said anything else.



Saku sank down by the cold ash.

He rubbed his hands on his knees.

They were still shaking.

He pressed his palms against the ground to ease the shaking.



A boy shook his head.

"Arja and her stupid plans," he said. "It was never going to work."

Saku's hands curled into fists.

"It was going to work," he said. "I failed it. I got scared."

Saku felt the heat rise in his chest.

"But you failed too," he said.

He looked around the clearing.

"If more of us had gone, it wouldn't have been so hard. It wouldn't have been so scary."

Silence.

"I can't change what you do, but I can try to fix my mistakes. I'm going back. Alone if I have to." he said.

Saku stepped into the grass.

No one followed.



Saku walked into the
grass.

The blades brushed
against his arms.

The crickets were loud
again.

His hands were still
shaking.

He kept walking.



Saku didn't slow.

A footstep sounded behind
him.

Then another.

"Saku," someone said.

He stopped.

"We're coming," a voice
said.

More steps behind him.

Saku looked back.

They were there.



They crouched by the crack in the wall.

Inside, the witch stood near the fire.

Arja sat in a small cage on the floor.

The thimble still lay on the table.

"We rush in," someone whispered.

"You grab the Thimble Saku."

Saku shook his head.

"She'll grab whoever she sees first."

Silence.

"Let it be me," he said.

The others stared at him.

"When she grabs me, don't stop."

Saku said

"Throw the thimble in the fire."



They pulled away from the crack.

Saku nodded once.

Then he pushed the door open.

The children rushed in behind him.

The witch turned.

Saku ran straight toward her.

His hands were shaking.

The witch's laugh filled the room.

He wanted to stop.

He didn't.

Her hand shot out.

It closed around him.



The witch lifted Saku high above
the floor.

“Got you,” she said.

The others were still rushing in.

She caught one by the sleeve.

Another by the collar.

A third by the hood.

Now she held them all.

Four small bodies twisting and
kicking.



They pulled in every
direction.

She tried to hold them.

It was too many.

Her fingers began to slip.

Saku twisted hard.

She couldn't keep her grip.

He dropped beside the table
and started running for the
thimble.



Saku threw the thimble
into the fire.

The witch screamed.

“NO—”

Light burst from the
flames.

The hut shook.

“What did you—” she
gasped.



The witch's voice cracked.

Her body shrank.

The fire dimmed.

Saku stared.

The witch stood there,
small.

As small as him.



The witch stood on the floor,
small, breathing hard.

No one moved.

She looked at the children.

“I suppose,” she said slowly,
“we work together now.”

Saku didn't answer.

The witch brushed ash from
her sleeve.

“I don't intend to stay like
this,” she said. “I will need
your help.”



"I don't have a plan yet." the witch said.

She drew a breath.

"But I can prove I mean to work with you."

"I have enough magic left for one child."

"One child grows. The rest stay small."

"For now."

Silence.

Saku didn't hesitate.

"Arja."

Arja shook her head in the cage.

"She goes," Saku said.

The witch watched him.

"You're sure?"

Saku nodded.



The witch stepped to
the cage and opened
the door.

Arja stepped out.

The witch touched her
head.



The fire flared.

Arja gasped.

She began to grow.

The witch stepped back.

“Wait,” the witch said.

Arja kept growing.

As she rose, the witch
shrank a little more.

Arja stood there, tall
again.



The thimble lay in the ashes.

Its edge was blackened.

A thin crack ran down its side.

The fire leaned toward Arja.

"Don't," the witch said.

Arja lifted her hand.

The thimble scraped across the stone floor.

It stopped at her feet.

Saku stared. "You didn't touch it."

Arja shook her head. "I didn't have to."

The witch sank down.

She looked at the cracked thimble.

Then at Arja.

"When I made you big," she said, "the rest
of my magic went with it."

She gave a short, tired smile.

"Congrats. You're the thimble witch now."



Arja picked up the cracked
thimble.

Saku saw her fingers tighten.

The metal trembled in her
hand.

A thin line of light flickered
along the crack.

“Careful,” the witch said.

Arja didn’t answer.

She looked at Saku once.

Then she lifted the thimble
and placed it on her head.



Arja looked at the others.

"Big again," she said.

The thimble flashed.

The air shuddered.

Everything swayed.

Saku stumbled as his feet found solid ground.

He blinked.

The witch stood there, tall again.

But the hut felt different.

The ceiling was too close.

"We're too big," he whispered.

The witch looked at her own hands, then at the door.

She gave a small shrug.

"It's the crack," she said. "The thimble is not working like it used to."

Arja touched the thimble on her head.

"It's okay," she said. "It's just a little bit. We'll have to duck a little more that's all."



The others walked
away through the grass.

Talking. Laughing.

Saku stayed.



Arja turned the broken
thimble in her hands.

She looked back at the
hut. Then at the
thimble.

“I’ll keep it,” she said.
“Someone should.”



Outside, the fence was still there.

The apple lay under the tree,
bruised.

Saku picked it up.

The witch stood nearby, pulling
her coat tight.

Saku held out the apple.

“For you,” he said.

She looked at it.

Then at him.

“... Thank you,” she said.

She took a bite.

Saku walked on smiling.

