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A woman with long dark hair, wearing a long, flowing green dress, stands with her back to the camera on a dirt path in a forest. She is looking towards a bright, full moon in a dark, cloudy night sky. The trees are tall and thin, creating a dense canopy. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

A WITCH'S
POISON

A CAPTRIX CHRONICLES STORY

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used ficticiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events are purely coincidental.

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PART ONE

THE FIRST TIME I saw Artemis Capp, I stood in the pasta aisle of Food Lion, the local supermarket in the small town of New Meadows. Even though I hated this grocery store because it was constantly dirty and never had the food I really desired, I forced myself to go here. The tiny store made it so I could get in and out without being noticed.

That was always the goal—I never wanted to be seen. I dressed in long skirts and long sleeve shirts in public to hide as much skin as possible, going as far as consistently wearing my brown wavy hair down to cover the back of my neck. The outfit was supposed to make me look plain, unnoticeable. At the very least, a patron of the store would think I was a devout religious woman covering my body for modesty’s sake.

That wasn’t why I covered my skin.

I’m a Domum, otherwise known as a house witch that can perform spells and use basic telekinesis. The side effect of my powers is a light sheen that appears on my skin. To a regular human eye, it comes across as an inner glow. But to Artemis Capp, the small bit of wrist, I shone when grabbing a box of lasagna noodles from the top shelf looked like a disco ball.

It had been a long time since I saw a Captrix, a witch huntress, out in the wild. But there was no mistaking who the woman passing by the macaroni and cheese was, even though she appeared average in dark wash jeans and a black t-shirt, printed with a random business name on it. She had blonde hair shaped into a pixie cut and piercing blue eyes observing the scene with her phone pressed to her ear.

“What type of mac and cheese did you want,” she said, barely listening to the conversation as she focused on my wrist. “Okay, I got it. I’ll be home soon.”

This was a woman who was always on edge, ready to attack at any moment, causing her to look rigid as she put the box of shells and cheese into her cart.

I blinked twice, hoping I could carefully set the package of noodles into my basket without her noticing me. But the Captrix looked at me too long. I continued pushing my cart down the aisle, struggling to walk with confidence. When I passed her, we locked eyes, and I knew she was going to try and kill me.

She stalked me as I rushed to the checkout line and then placed the purchased groceries in my car. She was never too close. If I turned around, I wouldn’t immediately see her, but if I paused for a second, she would roll her cart around the aisle I left. When I checked out, she was buying her own food only a few lines away. She refused to glance in my direction,

even though I knew she was following me.

I swallowed hard as I cranked my car, trying to decide what I wanted to do.

Maybe she will just go home.

A fool's thought. Even though I had sat in the parking area with the street lamp glowing over my car for an extra five minutes, I never saw another vehicle leave the store with her in it. I considered waiting her out for longer in the parking lot, but I didn't want to be left here too late and end up alone with her here. Being in public would be my best weapon against her. Captrixes had some sort of code that prevented them from revealing the magical world to humans, so she would never attack me as long as people were around. However, there was nothing in this parking lot I could lift in order to attack her.

You couldn't fight for long anyway, Bridgette.

I sighed, knowing fighting was a silly plan. Sure, I might fling a few things at her. Maybe throw her across the lot, but if I did too much evil magic against her, I would transform into a Venefica. A Venefica was a witch creature that hunted people to devour their souls, another caveat of my nature. Once I transformed into this creature, I would not only lose my humanity, but I would never change back. Didn't this Captrix know this? Hence why Domums weren't aggressive towards them or humans? This made her hunting me even more unfair. If I defended myself against a Captrix, I would become a soul-sucking monster. If I didn't defend myself, I would die.

I gave up and pulled out of my parking spot and began driving home. If I could make it to my secret perimeter veil, I just might be able to lose her and avoid confrontation at all. I would gain another day of life and enough time to pack all my things and leave for a new hiding spot. I hoped the cottage I lived in now would be my forever home since I had stayed in the area for five years with no issues, because I hated starting all over. It would be hard to run again.

Driving toward my house, I took extra seconds to remain on busy streets, praying I would lose her in the traffic. After a red light and a few blocks, I realized the silver truck tailing me was her, as it always remained a causal distance in the background to make it seem like I wasn't being followed. But after the same pickup turns behind you three times in a row, there was no mistaking what was happening. I needed to figure out a way to get my car into my driveway before Artemis spotted the veil. I tore through ideas in my mind as I drove outside of the city limits where the number of cars thinned. Only a few more minutes and I would be home.

I noticed a few cars in front of me turning off and took my chance. I sped to 80 miles per hour on the country road and passed them, making sure another vehicle was coming to block the truck's path behind me. My engine coughed, causing my car to lurch, and I wondered if I made the wrong decision. I kept pressing on, though, pushing my speed even higher to create a larger gap. She was further behind now, caught behind vehicles turning, unable to pass them out of kindness and the traffic on the other side of the highway. The dirt road appeared in front of me on my right and I drifted onto the sand. My car fishtailed, but I recovered it before I ended up backward in the deep ditches on either side of the road. Over a more shallow part of the ditch on my right, my protection veil shimmered, beckoning me to turn in and come home.

I pulled the car in and where it should have fallen into a ditch transformed into a concrete driveway leading up to my cottage. The glitter that rained down from the cloak dissipated as it covered the car. I drove it up a few paces, shut off the engine, and exited the car. Sucking in a deep breath, I walked closer to the protection wall to see if she was coming. The protection veil made everything beyond it appear like a sheet of glass, so when I looked out to observe the road, it appeared hazy, like looking through a dirty lens. Even though the outside wasn't crystal clear, there was no mistaking the truck lights that turned onto my dirt road.

My breath hitched in my chest as my heart started pounding. If the Captrix was this close, would she figure out my protection veil? I spelled the veil to keep evil out, and no one other than me or another powerful Domum could only disarm

it. However, loving Bridgette, who I hated at this moment, spelled the veil to allow good people in case they required help. Captrixes weren't known to be recognized as evil, so I assumed the veil would let her in if she found the border.

Then, I realized loving Bridgette also put in another aspect of the spell. The veil would sparkle a slight shimmer if someone needed access. Now I didn't know how the spell would determine who needed entry. When I cast this spell five years ago, I did it to help people. I wasn't concerned with how the spell would react to witch huntresses, even though I should have been.

I felt my palms grow sweaty as the truck drove past my driveway entrance. The truck stopped, leaving the headlights on to illuminate the dark road. After the engine died, the driver's door slammed, but I remained frozen in my position. The Captrix circled around the back of the vehicle, eyes focused on the ground. She was searching for my tire tracks.

I considered running to my cottage, but the space was small, so I could be cornered there. The best option I had would be to face her out in the open if she passed through the veil. The Captrix's head snapped up, looking in my direction, and I held in a gasp. If the protection wall wasn't in front of me, we would have made eye contact again. She walked closer to the line of the veil and reached out to touch it, but snatched her hand back.

Squinting my eyes, I tried to see through the hazy veil and figure out what made her change her mind when a dog escaped from the woods onto the road. The brindle-colored dog had a medium stocky build with a smushed in nose. I analyzed the folds in the coat, realizing the dog was some sort of mixed breed Sharpei. If a Sharpei had a black fog hovering around their bodies and red eyes. A witch spelled the dog with evil magic and the dog was stomping its way right to the huntress.

She rolled her eyes as if she was listening to a voice in her head as the dog continued to stalk her. I opened my mouth to scream a warning, but my throat went dry. If I yelled, it would reveal my location.

The dog continued to stalk her and when it got about three feet away, it coiled its legs to prepare a lethal jump, eyes fixated on her throat. As it leaped in the air, the Captrix responded, clotheslining the creature just in time. She stumbled, losing her balance, but remained upright. The dog shook again and ran at the recovering woman, this time knocking her over. The huntress punched the Sharpei in the face and if this was an ordinary dog, it would have been stunned. It snapped at her instead. She pushed it off again, reaching down to her black boots, but the dog sank its teeth into the woman's calf before she got there. The Captrix screamed from the white-hot pain.

Against my better judgment, I knew I had to do something. I was sure the Captrix would eventually win this fight, but I assumed the witch creature that sent this animal spelled it to have poisonous bites. Even if the woman killed the dog, she would still suffer a slow, painful death long after she escaped without my help. While it made sense for me to let this happen to protect myself and my home, it wasn't in my morals to do so. I hated that about me being a good person.

I jolted myself from my spot and stepped through the veil, causing it to rain more glitter down as the invisibility lifted off of me. Reaching out my hand, I fixated all of my energy on lifting the Sharpei and tossing it down the road. It landed with a thud and the Captrix looked at me. The dog shook off the throw, so I picked it up again, throwing it into one of the pine trees that lined the ditch. This time, the impact was harder against the wood of the tree, and I felt it reverberate back into my bones. Even though the Sharpei was evil, my witch powers still recognized hurting anything as a misuse of power.

The evil voice from my powers sang in my head. Use more. Hurt more. Transform into who you were meant to be.

My hands tingled as more power surged through me. I took a deep breath to recenter myself, knowing I was leading myself down a dark hole.

The Captrix rose, limping slightly from the thigh bite, and locked eyes with me. She reached down into her boot and pulled out a dagger. The dog shook itself again, this time lasering its red eyes on me. Even though it was created to kill the

Captrix, its target had changed. The creature stood and began running at me.

"I'm going to lift the dog and throw it at your feet. You have to stab it, okay?" I centered my focus on the dog, trying to ignore the tingle in my hands.

The Captrix nodded a response, and I hoped she wouldn't let me down. I lifted the Sharpei again, torqued my hand to my right, smacking it down in front of the Captrix's feet. It took more power to press firm gravity onto the creature, but I held the dog down to give her enough time.

Use more. Hurt More. Transform into who you were meant to be.

I shook my head, trying to ignore the evil building inside of me.

"Do it now!" I started to shake, holding down my power.

The Captrix knelt down and stabbed the creature. One, two, three times in the heart, causing black blood splatter to cover her blade and the dirt. The dog convulsed for a moment, but eventually went still. I released my hold on the Sharpei as the black cloud and red eyes disappeared, leaving a poor, dead stray dog in the road.

I flinched, hating the fact the witch creature used an innocent animal to cause pain. I condoned nothing they did, but some things were too cruel. Witch creatures that had power over animals or on the verge Veneficas did this magic as a way to get past Captrix's walls, but I never had to aid in the killing of an animal like this.

I flexed my hands, returning them to my side as my magic calmed back into a lull inside me. A small prayer came into my mind my mother taught me for the animal.

May you find peace on the other side and rest. I pray the trials and tribulations you endured here have all been worth it when you see the other side for the first time. Please guide me as I try to right the wrongs done to you.

A sigh escaped me as the Captrix stood up again, pointing the dagger at me. In my trailing thoughts about the poor dog, I forgot the problem at hand. The woman had seen me exit my shield, so walking back into it hoping to hide would be pointless. But the evil already surged in my veins so much that I feared if I attacked her, it would snowball into my Venefica transformation. But was I supposed to let her kill me? Was there no other way this could go? I swallowed, lubricating my dry throat.

"That bite was poisonous. I can help you if you don't kill me." I took a step backward, away from the dagger.

When it shone in the light, I was able to analyze it better. The dagger swirled with different metals, one of them being copper. Even though I could be killed by the blade since I was mostly human, the copper mixed in would burn and cause deep wounds.

"Why would I trust the witch," the Captrix motioned at the dead animal, "who sent that after me?"

"I couldn't have sent that after you, even if I wanted to." The spell took too much time I never had after the grocery store and required a dog to cast upon. Two things I didn't have.

She looked at me hard, her stare unwavering. The dagger remained fixed in my direction. I rolled my eyes and heaved a sigh of frustration.

"What exactly do you think you know about me?" I figured if I stayed confident, maybe she would decide to call it a night. Especially with the soon-to-be nasty wound.

"I know you're a Domum based on your skin and you hurt people."

"I hurt people?" A ridiculous laugh escaped me. "I keep to myself and create healing salves to peddle at a craft show now and then. The rest of the time, I'm home." I waved at the protection veil, causing it to shake a bit of glitter. "If anyone hurts people here, it's you."

"I don't hurt people. I kill witch creatures to keep them safe." She looked at the glitter cascading down from the wall.

“What is that?” The Captrix motioned with the tip of the dagger.

“My protection veil. It keeps me hidden unless someone needs me.”

I glanced down at her ripped pants at the wound. The blood that oozed red before was turning grey. In a few more hours, it would be black.

“If I don’t help you with that bite, you’re going to die. You may kill me first, but you will still die,” I said, locking eyes with her. I tried to push out trust me vibes with the hope she would finally put the lethal dagger down.

The Captrix glanced down at her leg, observing the bite. Recognition flashed across her face, and I observed her throat move as she swallowed hard. She bit her lip, trying to make a decision, and looked at the wound again.

“I can’t die yet,” said the Captrix. Her voice had lost its edge of confidence, but she straightened and flexed her fingers on the hilt of the dagger.

Something about the look on her face gave me the overwhelming feeling someone was waiting for her. My mind flashed back to the grocery store where she had hung up the phone as she placed the macaroni and cheese in her cart.

“Put the dagger away and I’ll help you,” I said, backing up closer to the wall. I wasn’t brave enough to turn my back on her yet.

“I don’t trust you.” The dagger lowered a smidge, but she still kept it at the appropriate stabbing area.

“I don’t trust you either, but I want to help you.” I didn’t wish to look at the dog, but my gaze centered on it again. “If I was going to kill you, I would have let that done the job.”

“Fair enough, but one sketchy move and I’m plunging this straight into your heart.”

“Lovely. On that note, let me show you my home,” I said, gritting my teeth as I plastered on a pleasant smile.

The woman lowered the dagger and placed it in the back pocket of her jeans. A stupid place if you asked me, but I understood not wanting to reach down by your oozing leg. She stumbled to her truck, turned the lights off, and followed me through the protection veil. After a quick ride in the car, where the Captrix dangled her legs out the passenger door, we walked on my porch.

“Give me one sec,” I said, unlocking the front door.

Out of habit, I opened the door and paused over the threshold, listening. Even though I was confident in my magic, I always did a quick check after I had been gone for a while. I inhaled deeply, searching for any unfamiliar scents from an intruder’s spell work. Smelling nothing and satisfied in the cottage’s safety, I flicked on the hall light and motioned the Captrix in. She followed me down the hallway as I turned various switches on to illuminate our way. When we entered the kitchen, I pointed her to one of the wooden chairs around my large round table that sat on the left side of the room.

“I’m Bridgette, by the way.” I walked to my wire shelving unit on the back wall of the small kitchen, glancing at the various salves and vials I kept there, trying to figure out something I thought would work.

The Captrix hesitated to give me her name for good reason. I knew someone’s name could be used to perform horrible spells.

“I won’t use your name for any nasty spells. I swear.” My eyes settled on a jar of Valerian root. It would be good for the pain, but the poison was still a problem, so I also grabbed a jar of peeled ginger.

“Artemis. I’m Artemis.” She reached down to roll up her pants leg and analyze the bite herself.

The wound dripped a darkening grey color that caused me to furrow my brow. This poison was working faster than I had seen before and I didn’t like it. Artemis’s face grew pale as sweat started running down her forehead. I grabbed the jar of Valerian root and put it on the table before adding ginger root. If I set my intentions right, the ginger would burn out the poison or at least negate it while I figured out something else.

"I think I'm dying," whispered Artemis and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

I threw the Valerian root into a mortar and pestle I grabbed from my storage shelf before adding a chunk of peeled ginger root and grounding the concoction together, including a bit of water to make a thick paste. Holding the mortar in my palms, my head fought to center itself. These plain items had magical properties of their own, but without my intention, I would smear watery ginger on her leg. My brain scattered with the hum of evil still trying to pull me, worry about screwing up consuming me, and the fear of dying at the hands of a Captrix.

Breathe Bridgette.

My chest heaved as I forced myself to take deep breaths. I stared at the leg wound, seeing the ooze turn black, and returned my focus to the mortar and pestle. Removing the pestle, I laid it on the table and wrapped my hands around the bowl. I pushed energy, causing a surge in my body towards the mixture, and pictured the paste glowing with healing power. My arms tingled as the magic moved to my hands and then to the bowl. Kneeling down next to Artemis's leg, I scooped the concoction with my fingers and coated it onto the dog bite. As I smeared the paste, I saw the healing energy glow up Artemis's veins, eating away the death consuming her body. I steeled my intention, repeating a healing mantra in my head until I entered a trance-like state. The now black goo absorbed into the ginger and Valerian root and the color returned to Artemis's skin.

The mortar fell to the floor beside me as I broke my healing trance. My body felt light and my vision blurred as my magic tried to resettle itself. My arms shot out behind me to hold myself up as I fought to not faint.

Blinking rapidly, I cleared my vision so the room could come back into focus. When I felt strong enough, I leaned up to look at the dog bite. It no longer oozed black, but still seemed swollen from incomplete treatment. My eyes trailed up Artemis's legs and torso until they found her face. Her coloring looked healthier, and she dared to wipe the sweat away from her forehead. I sighed, relieved she was alive, until the thought repulsed me. I had to be one of the only witches to save someone who considered killing them moments before.

I pulled my legs in to see if they were strong enough to hold up, but they quivered, so I released them back down, choosing to remain on the floor than to show weakness by crawling until I found something to lift me up. The paste tingled on my fingers, so I wiped the excess residue on my skirt. Another wave of exhaustion flowed through me, proving I didn't have the stamina to be using this much magic in a brief span of time.

"Are you okay?" Artemis wriggled her way out of the slump she fell into when she passed out and then peered at me a moment too long before turning her head.

"I'm fine. Just-." I stopped myself from revealing I was weak. I still didn't know her intentions. "Need to catch my breath. I had to work fast."

Artemis glanced down at her leg, giving the wound a hesitant poke before grimacing.

"Are you okay?" I pushed myself to stand up and found a chair to sit in before my legs gave up again.

"I've been better, but I'm not dead." Artemis poked the swelled skin again, regretted it, and returned her hand to her lap. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"In person? No. I can't dabble in this kind of spell work." I pondered a list of witch creatures in my head, trying to think of what witch could do this until I settled on a half-hearted response. "Maybe a Beastia?"

"A Beastia? I thought they were wiped out?"

"Technically yes. But they are an offshoot of the Venefica transformation, so how can you be sure?"

Artemis rolled her eyes in disdain, belittling my theory. I crossed my arms in frustration, trying to think of anything else, but couldn't. A Beastia was a solid idea even if she didn't want to listen. They were a rare form of the Venefica

transformation where, instead of consuming human souls, the witch craved animal souls instead. As the witch creature devoured animal spirits, they became animal-like, taking on the characteristics of the animals they stole from. Hence the name *Beastia* or *beast* in Latin. A newly turned *Beastia* had the ability to control animals like the dog into doing their bidding until they transformed into the creature. Possessing animals to give out poisonous bites wouldn't be far out of their wheelhouse.

"You asked my opinion and I gave it." I huffed, ready to get this headstrong *Captrix* out of my house, so I could go to bed.

Artemis sighed back at me, crossing her arms in front of her, mirroring me. I shook my arms out, refusing to match her.

"If it was a *Beastia*, she would have been on the ground instead of the dog," said Artemis.

"Not if she was new and controlling the animal from afar. That's why the animal reverted back after dying."

"What other witch choices do we have?"

I felt the sting of her swatting my idea out of the air again and wondered why I was letting her get under my skin so much. I shouldn't care what she thought and instead should be focused on getting her out of my cottage.

"A *Domum* performing black magic and probably turning into a *Venefica* as we speak."

Artemis nodded, content pushing the blame on an innocent witch like me.

"But," I cut my eyes so I could bore into her blue ones. Even in my anger, I noticed how beautiful and clear they appeared, like the crescent of an ocean wave. "The poison advanced too fast to be a low-level curse from a *Domum*. A *Venefica* isn't going to concern themselves with sending animals, since they prefer being hands on." I forced a tight smile. "Leaving us with a *Beastia*."

Artemis licked her lips as she prepared a response, but when she opened her mouth to speak, her phone vibrated in her pocket. She held up a finger for me to pause, which annoyed me as much as her disregarding my ideas.

"Hey Dad," said Artemis, putting on a more cheery tone for him.

I heard mumbling come from the phone, but I couldn't make out what the other end was saying.

"No, no, I'm fine. I just got tied up." Artemis pressed her lips together as she listened to the response.

I didn't know what to think about her having a family. It was enough to swallow the fact Artemis possibly had a child, but an entire family? It made her seem normal, softened her a bit, allowing me to see more of an injured woman in front of me rather than a soulless *Captrix*.

Artemis brushed back an invisible hair into her pixie cut as she grew tired from the conversation on the phone.

"I'll be home soon and I'll make dinner. Also have A-." Artemis's eyes shot up to look at me as if she realized she was still in a stranger's presence. "Have her do her history readings. Please?"

So it was confirmed, Artemis had a daughter, another *Captrix* in the making. I didn't know what to think about that, but my brain trailed off to wonder if she also had a partner and what it would be like to be with a *Captrix*. My nomadic lifestyle never gave me a chance to develop a long-term connection like that and on quiet nights, it was something I craved.

Artemis said a few more words and hung up the phone, returning it to her pocket, bringing me back to the present time.

"I have to go, but is there a way for you to track the magic to see if it's really a *Beastia*?" Artemis stood, putting soft pressure on her injured leg.

"You want me to do your job for you?" I wasn't in the business of helping a *Captrix* like this. This was meant to be a one-time deal, not force me into indentured servitude to stay alive.

"In a way? If I do old-fashioned tracking, it could take days or weeks for me to find the witch creature who did this. She's

locked on to me and I can't risk taking magic like that home." Artemis paused and took in a deep breath. "If it's a Bestia, my family is in danger every minute she's alive."

I thought about her request, turning the idea over in my head until I gave in. Even if I wanted to hate her given how much she had done to hurt Domums and my own family, it wasn't in my blood to refuse someone who needed help.

"Fine. But I'm not touching the dog and I can't do it right now. You'll have to come back tomorrow." I pushed the image of the dead sharpei mix laying in the road out of my mind before it had the chance to become permanent.

"I'll get the dog and bring it back tomorrow night."

Artemis moved to leave the kitchen, but I grabbed her arm. She jerked, not expecting the touch, but calmed before I let go.

"I need to give you some more of this salve to put on for when you get home. I don't have time to put it in a better vehicle, so you'll need to smear it on."

Normally, I would mix the roots in with some shea butter or beeswax so it could be applied smoothly. However, it didn't seem like I had the time now to make a nice presentation or to preserve the half-made salve for my own stores. I scooped what I left in the mortar into a small mason jar I had and gave it to Artemis.

"Thank you, Bridgette." Artemis took an extra look at the jar before stiffening.

It was strange to watch her put on this emotional armor like a coat, but it was almost like the normal person I saw before disappeared underneath required regalness and strength.

Nodding, I lead her out of the cottage before taking her back to her truck. Finally, after Artemis was settled and backing out, I gave a stupid wave I regretted as she drove away.



PART TWO

I SAT AT THE kitchen table, hovering over a magic tracking spell. The spell was one I turned past most of the time, looking for different gardening spells in the back of the book. However, this time I forced myself to stop and study it in order to prepare for the magic Artemis required of me tonight.

The spell wasn't difficult by any means. It only required an incantation instead of a full circle setup, which was nice. But as I studied the Latin words, I couldn't decide whether my magic would register the spell as evil. It took a delicate balance to keep myself in equilibrium, something Artemis probably didn't understand. Captrix had killed many Domums over the years because of our inevitable transformation. They chose not to understand what we dealt with when huntresses forced us to defend ourselves. To them, it was okay to kill us as we changed to something evil. They never took the time to realize sometimes they forced the transformation themselves.

This happened to my mother and sisters when a group found us before I was aware Captrix even existed. My mother protected my sisters and me with combative magic until she turned and was executed. I was the youngest daughter around five, so my sisters stepped up afterward following the same fate. When the Captrix got to me, she couldn't kill an innocent five-year-old that hadn't transformed, so she left me there alone. Later, when I learned what took place, I promised myself I wouldn't transform to honor my family, so I kept myself hidden as often as possible. Their sacrifice couldn't be in vain.

And now I found myself breaking my promise and helping a sworn enemy. A sworn enemy that barely understood me or my powers and treated me like a sidekick? As much as I wanted to hate Artemis and paint her in my mind as a villain, seeing her hurt and speaking with family humanized her too much.

I rubbed my forehead, frustrated with the back and forth in my mind, so I tried to focus more on the spell. The words ran together on the page from my constant staring, turning the Latin into a jumbled mess. I blinked a few times before mouthing the Latin words to practice the pronunciation to make sure I was only going to perform this spell once. Frustration continued to grow, so I slammed the book shut and walked to the stove to make a cup of tea to calm myself.

The moment the sun set, when there was still purple and orange in the sky, I noticed Artemis pass through my veil. A few minutes later, she knocked on the door, so I grabbed my spell book off the table to answer it. When I opened the door, Artemis stood on the steps, waiting for me to come out. She looked more like a Captrix now, which made my skin crawl. The all-black leather huntress outfit, made for movement and support, also contained extra pockets packed with various

weapons. I looked down at my outfit, simple dark wash jeans, and a black long sleeve shirt, and felt strangely underdressed.

"Are you ready," asked Artemis as she looked at her cell phone to check the time. "I don't have a lot of time tonight."

"Yeah. I've got the spell right here." I waved the book in my hand and closed the front door behind me. "Did you bring the dog?"

My stomach clenched at the thought of the decaying animal, undeserving of its fate.

"It's in the back of the truck. Can you perform the spell there, or do I need to set it on the ground?"

"On the ground, please." I followed Artemis around to the rear of the truck.

She put down the tailgate, revealing a closed black trash bag with a giant lump inside. Artemis pulled the bag out and sat it on the ground a few feet away from our vehicles. Rather than sliding the animal out, she took out a pocketknife from her pants and cut open the sack. The smell hit me first, causing me to gag at the decaying dog. Then, the visual registered in my mind and I turned around to catch my breath.

Artemis came closer and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. I expected myself to flinch, but I found myself relaxing into the touch.

"Are you okay," asked Artemis.

A loaded question because I wasn't okay at all, but I didn't have a choice.

"I'm fine." I shrugged off her hand and turned around to the dog, trying to not really look at it again.

I fidgeted with my book, flipping to the page I needed. Artemis gave me a bit of space as I read the lines over one more time. I held my hand out, not because the spell said I had to, but it seemed strange to not use my body to focus my energy. Licking my lips, I recited the words of the spell and pushed my energy towards the dead animal. My arm tingled as my magic moved inside, obeying my intention to track magic. I waited for the whisper in my head, but things remained silent.

The magic covered the animal like a golden sparkling blanket as each little piece searched to find who cast the spell. I wasn't sure if Artemis spotted it because she didn't move or react to the magic. She looked like she was still waiting for something to happen. Eventually, the magic congregated at the dog's heart, stealing a black orb the size of a marble. My golden magic built a larger orb the size of a softball around the black marble and lifted it up in the air, staying translucent enough, so I could watch the remnants of evil magic try to move out. My magic paused in the air, waiting for my next command, so I nodded for it to continue. The orb floated towards the road.

"The orb's moving for you now. All you have to do is follow it to your witch." I closed my book, ready for a quick goodbye.

"What's moving?" Artemis looked at me with confusion as her eyes searched the air.

"You don't see the gold orb floating away with dark magic?" I pointed at my ball of magic that continued to drift away.

"No?" Artemis searched again. "I don't see anything."

"If you can't see it, how are you going to track it to the Beastia?"

"You're going to have to come with me."

My heart sank into my stomach. I didn't plan on this being a full excursion and thought I could do one spell to solve this problem. My orb kept moving closer to the edge of the property line, not stopping. If I didn't decide soon, I would lose my spell for nothing. So I made the stupid decision and ran to jump into Artemis's truck.

"If we don't start moving now, I'll lose the orb." I opened the truck door and hopped in.

Artemis raced to the driver's side and began following my magic. We caught up with it, no problem, so I made Artemis slow down to a creep as I watched the orb bobble in the air. When we exited my driveway, we took a left, following the dirt road further down until it dead-ended into the woods. Artemis shut off the truck, and we started tracking by foot.

I walked behind, allowing Artemis to cut through or push branches out of the way for me. A few minutes into our walk, my orb froze in the air as the black marble slowed its bouncing as if it was close to home.

“It stopped.” I stepped over a limb on the ground before smacking into Artemis’s back.

She lurched forward, but caught her balance right away. Artemis peeked over her shoulder, checking to make sure I was alright.

“What’s it doing?” Artemis pulled a copper tube out of her pants leg about the length of her forearm and held it in her hand.

“Hovering? The dark magic is calming as well.” I squinted my eyes to see if the orbs were doing anything else. “I think we might be close.”

Artemis pressed a button on the tube and it expanded into a full-size copper spear. I swallowed as my magic hummed, recognizing how close its enemy metal was. She looked around the area ahead of us, trying to detect any other movement. In the silence, I sensed my magic needing something from me in order to finish the spell, but I didn’t know what to give it. The spell desired a command, so I explored my brain to figure out what to say.

Finish.

The orb retained its position, so I decided that was the wrong command.

Let go.

My magic shook as the black magic inside started buzzing around the orb again. I hoped this was the right command because my magical orb dissipated in the air, letting the black marble bounce its way forward. I watched the other magic push through the trees until it stopped to float down on something I couldn’t make out. Staring harder, I noticed two red eyes lingering in the dark.

“Artemis,” I whispered. “She’s up ahead. I can see her eyes.”

Artemis stiffened, creating distance between us as she shifted into a fighter mindset. She remained still, listening to the breeze floating between the trees, until she turned around with surprise showing in her eyes.

“Duck!” Artemis pointed the spear up in the air.

I heaved myself, bending in half as a screaming cat with flailing razor-sharp claws, sailed over my body. Artemis caught it with the spear, tossing it forward and stabbed threw it when the cat landed on the ground. More animal eyes started moving through the trees surrounding us. I leaned back up as a variety of evil stray cats launched themselves at us. Artemis made easy work of them, stumbling into a rhythm with her spear, but I saw a larger bobcat stalking her from the side. The animal sprang, scratching Artemis’s arm as it tried to bite and grab hold. My reflexes kicked in, and I stuck out my arms and magic threw the spelled creature away from her. Before I realized, my magic plunged a sharp branch into the bobcat’s heart. I quivered, observing my magic frenzy under my skin as Artemis finished the creature and figured out what I did for her.

Use more. Hurt more. Transform into who you were meant to be.

I ignored the whisper, throwing another cat away from us. The red eyes in the forest approached, emerging into the Bestia. She looked young, maybe a few years shy of thirty, and resembled a Venefica. Black hair hung around her paper-white skin, hiding most of her facial features. She remained dressed in what she transformed in, a light blue maxi dress, but holes plagued the dress from being in the woods. A slight fur formed on her hands and her nails were becoming more claw-like as she called more animals to her. Other than the fur, what really set her apart from a Venefica was the blood-red eyes she possessed instead of the typical black ones.

When she stepped into our tight area, a trio of poisonous rattlesnakes followed her, shaking their rattles into the night.

Fear rushed over me at the sight of them. Scratching cats I could handle, but snakes were a whole other thing. I took a few steps back, adjusting my footing further away from the new arrivals.

An intrusion entered my head, forcing a connection, as I felt Artemis inside of me.

“Keep the snakes at bay and I’ll handle her,” whispered Artemis inside of my head.

The sensation of her being there was strange. Even though it was an intrusion, whenever she spoke, it felt like being wrapped in a warm blanket, as if the connection was always meant to be there.

“I don’t like snakes,” I mentally said back.

An image forced into my mind, showing me pushing the snakes away with my telekinesis as Artemis stabbed the Beastia with the spear. The image was jarring compared to the mental message, but it got the point across faster.

I sensed Artemis leave, and her departure snatched away the warm blanket feeling to be replaced by my thoughts. My attention snapped back to the Beastia, who was whispering to her slithering pets, waiting for us to make a move. It was a frozen game of chicken, as we all remained still.

My skin tingled with anticipation as the Beastia flexed her hand, making the first move. The rattlesnake to the left came forward and struck at Artemis’s shin. I pushed my magic out, catching the snake right before the fangs made it to the skin. The snake hovered, thrashing, and its comrades moved in unison. I whispered an incantation I used to light my fireplace when I found myself too lazy to do it without magic. Flames engulfed the snake, burning it into a crisp and surging the magic inside of me.

Use more. Hurt more. Transform into who you were meant to be.

The rhythm became natural as I tossed snakes and other creatures the Beastia summoned. Artemis fought hand to hand with the witch as I kept defending her with my magic. I felt exhilarated, enjoying the almost full capabilities of my powers as I continued saying spells and pushing my telekinesis to its limits.

I caught another snake midair as Artemis plunged the spear into the Beastia’s heart. The witch screamed as she fell on her back before turning into dust. Confused animals no longer under her command ran deeper into the forest as some fell to the ground to die like they were before the Beastia called to them. I looked over the scene of carnage and a wave of nausea hit me. Nausea settled with the feeling of emptiness and tingling in my skin. My magic wanted to be used more, to ascend. I hadn’t used enough for it and now I felt like a kid coming down from a sugar rush.

I needed another hit.

Artemis stood up, retracting the spear back to its compact size, and slipped it into her pocket. Her chest heaved as she caught her breath while also looking over all the dead animals.

“Can you burn them all? I don’t want to leave the scene like this.” Artemis stepped back from the Beastia dust, watching her feet carefully.

I knew I could. My body craved the power forming inside of me and wanted me to use my magic. The power needed to grow inside me until it consumed everything it touched. If I burned all the animals, I understood I might lose control and let my power do just that. But if I left them in the woods like this to rot, would I be honoring them? They didn’t choose to be a pawn in a witch’s game.

“I can’t do them all. We’ll have to choose what’s the worst.” My heart ached at not being able to help them all, but I was too close to losing control.

Artemis nodded, probably not understanding, but she didn’t argue with my decision. She surveyed the carnage, trying to decide what would be the worst.

“Do they need to be in a pile, or can you choose a species,” said Artemis over her shoulder as she roamed more around

the fight area.

“Preferably a pile.” It would help me concentrate instead of having to magnify my magic.

Artemis extended the spear, using it as a makeshift shovel to push all the cats into one pile. She added a few snakes, but left the rest out. I assumed she thought it would be more natural for a bunch of snakes to be dead in the woods than stray cats.

“Do this pile and hopefully the rest will be cleaned up by nature.” Artemis’s voice had the tiniest shard of disappointment that I wouldn’t do them all, as if she forgot I could transform from doing too much.

I walked closer to the disgusting pile of death, trying to not look at the animals, but imagining a pile of dirt instead. When I got close enough, I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath.

“May you find peace on the other side and rest. I pray the trials and tribulations you endured here have all been worth it when you see the other side for the first time. Please guide me as I try to right the wrongs done to you,” I whispered, not caring this time if Artemis heard it.

I recited the fire incantation, causing a billowing flame to burn high. The dead animals created a thick black smoke before finally dying down. This time I set the spell with the intention to turn things to dust, so after a few minutes the fire went out, leaving an enormous pile of ash. Artemis raked it out with her spear until the ash blended in with the earth.

Magic surged inside of me as I balled my hands into fists to stop the feeling. Whispers roamed my brain, asking me to use more. But a new whisper emerged I had never heard before.

If you take her soul, you will be more powerful.

My eyes bugged out as I followed Artemis back to the truck. I only heard this whisper once as it died away with the others, the less I performed magic. But hearing it and acknowledging this whisper meant there was a darker side of me I didn’t realize, and that terrified me. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans, wanting to get inside the cottage now.

It seemed like it took us forever to get back, but in a few minutes, Artemis and I stood in the living room across from each other, not knowing how to say goodbye. Artemis’s phone buzzed in her pocket and she took it out to read a message before typing a reply and slipping the phone back into her pocket.

“I need to get home.” Artemis put her hands in her pockets as if she didn’t know what to do with her body.

“Of course. It’s been a long night.” I laughed at my own awkwardness, holding my hands behind my back.

“Thanks for your help. I appreciate it.” Artemis smiled at me before adjusting her body to be back in control.

I walked her out of the living room, wondering how she switched personas from awkward to commanding so fast. Shaking my head, I opened the front door and watched as she skipped down the steps to her truck. About halfway to the vehicle, she stopped and turned around.

“Do you mind if I stop by again if I need help with something?”

“You’ve decided I’m not evil enough to kill?” I assumed I was going to have to find a new place to move to rather than always being afraid of being hunted.

“I was wrong. Domums need to be left alone.” Artemis sighed, shifting her weight on her feet. “I won’t come back if you don’t want me to.”

I thought about it. I spent most of my time alone, so it would be nice to have a friend stop by. Even if that friend was intent on stretching my control to its limits. But the consequence of not having a Captrix on my side could prove deadly. And I really didn’t want to move again.

“As long as you don’t tell anyone else where I live.” I straightened, trying to appear intimidating.

“I promise.” Artemis turned back to the truck before yelling over her shoulder. “See you hopefully soon.”

I laughed with her as I waited for her to get into the truck and drive away. Before going back into the house, an idea turned in my mind, giving me the feeling of having butterflies that turned into a grin.

God, she was so beautiful. I hope she comes back soon.

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